

I HAVE CALLED YOU FRIENDS (III): A Reciprocal Love

When the soldiers take Jesus prisoner, the apostles are frightened and flee. Unable to help, they don't want to witness the apparent failure of the person they had placed all their trust in. With his feet bound by chains, and cold from the night air, Jesus hears the clearly unjust sentence. Words are used with a twisted meaning and the punishment is excessive. On seeing Christ's wounded body, everyone clamors for his death. A tortuous way through the streets, the weight of the Cross, the hostile crowd waiting for the hammer blows... Finally, Our Lord's body is raised on high. From his solitary scaffold, Jesus looks with compassion on those who have refused to welcome God made man: *Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow (Lam 1:12)*.

Both physically and spiritually, Christ's pain during the Passion "was the greatest possible in this life."¹ He knows that He will not be spared any suffering. But God the Father has not wanted to deprive his Son, even during those moments, of the solace of friendship. There, at the foot of Cross, Jesus sees John looking at Him with the same eyes that had witnessed so many happy times with the Master. John offers his friend the same support that united them throughout so many journeys. He has returned and brought Mary with him. The one who had heard Christ's Heart beating at the Last Supper wants to offer Jesus his faithful friendship, simply by being present there. Our Lord finds comfort in seeing Mary and *the disciple whom he loved (Jn 19:26)*. On Calvary, amid the greatest sign of God's love for mankind, Jesus receives in turn this sign of human love. Perhaps his Heart beats with the words He had spoken just a few hours earlier: *I have called you friends (Jn 15:15)*.

Affection in two directions

Many pages in the Gospel tell us about Jesus' friends. Although usually we aren't given any details about how these deep relationships have come about, the reactions we see make clear that true mutual affection was present. In reading these passages we discover that Our Lord enjoyed being with his friends; his human heart didn't want to be without the reciprocity of human love: "The Gospel of Jesus Christ reveals to us that God cannot be without us: He will never be a God 'without man.' It is He who cannot be without us, and this is the great mystery!"²

For example, we know that Jesus always felt welcomed and loved in the home of his friends in Bethany. When Lazarus dies, his two sisters approach Our Lord with complete trust, and even use strong words that show Jesus' intimate relationship with their family: *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died (Jn 11:32)*. Their friend is moved by the sorrow of these two

¹ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 46, a. 6.

² Francis, Audience, 7 June 2017.

women and He cannot restrain his tears (cf. *Jn* 11:35). In their home Jesus found a place where He could rest, where He felt at ease and could open up his Heart completely: “What marvelous conversations in the home at Bethany, with Lazarus, Martha and Mary!”³

And just as many people found in Jesus a true friend, so too He found solace in the friendship others offered Him. He would have felt supported and consoled, for example, by the impetuous words of Peter (who was never reluctant to express out loud his eagerness to follow Jesus) when he saw the rich young man close off his soul to Love: “we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” (*Mt* 19:27). His great affection for our Lord led Peter to always want to strongly defend his friend, even changing his life when our Lord, with the strength that only full trust permits, corrected him (cf. *Mt* 16:21-23; *Jn* 13:9). And just as Jesus could rely on Peter’s strong support, so too He found rest in John’s courageous tenderness. How many conversations He would have had with that adolescent disciple! At the Last Supper, we witness how He willingly welcomes his tender gesture, when John reclines on his chest with the trust of one who knows his friend’s Heart. Although during Jesus’ agony in the Garden John failed to watch with Him, and fled when our Lord was taken prisoner, afterwards he repented and returned. And John experienced that friendship grows even stronger with forgiveness.

“We usually look at God as the source and substance of our peace. Although this is true, it isn’t the whole truth. We often fail to realize, for example, that we can also console God and offer Him rest.”⁴ True friendship always goes in both directions. Thus when we experience personally how much God loves us, the natural reply is to want to return his affection—opening the doors of our mind and heart fully to Him. Only in this way will we be able to give Jesus all the solace and love we are capable of, so that He will find in us what He found in Peter and John and in his friends at Bethany.

Friendship enriches our view of the world

Just as Jesus had many friends and God delights in the children of Adam (cf. *Prov* 8:31), so too it is good for us to experience this deeply human need. Our specific circumstances in life have led to the friends we have and our close relationships with them. When we think about how each of our friendships began, we may find a whole series of apparently chance events that brought us together. We should never fail to give thanks to God for the great treasure of having wanted to ensure that in our path through life we would enjoy the company and love of friends.

Among all the people we have met in our life, God chose some of them to be closer to us. He makes use of our friends to open up wide panoramas for us, to teach us new things and show us what true love is: “Our friends help us to understand ways of viewing life that are different from

³ Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, 24 October 1965.

⁴ Javier Echevarría, *Eucaristía y vida cristiana*, Rialp, 2005, p. 203.

our own, that enrich our inner world, and, when the friendship is deep, that enable us to experience the world in a different way.”⁵ C. S. Lewis, who had many deep friendships, said with his special sense of humor that friendship is not a reward for our own good taste but rather the means by which God reveals to us the beauty of other people and we learn to look at the world in new and richer ways.

“I am with you always, till the end of the age” (*Mt* 28:20), Jesus assured us. One way He does this is through the people who love us: “Faithful friends, who stand at our side in times of difficulty, are also a reflection of the Lord’s love, his gentle and consoling presence in our lives. The experience of friendship teaches us to be open, understanding and caring towards others, to come out of our own comfortable isolation and to share our lives with others. For this reason, ‘there is nothing so precious as a faithful friend’ (*Sir* 6:15).”⁶ Seeing friendship in this light spurs us to try to love our friends better, to see them as Jesus sees them. And this effort should go hand in hand with the struggle to let ourselves be called friends, since there is no true friendship without this reciprocal love.⁷

A mutual gift

Friendship is an unmerited gift, a relationship based on a lack of self-interest. Some people, out of a badly understood desire to please “only God,” have viewed the consolation of friendship with jealousy and mistrust. In a homily preached for the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Saint Josemaria insisted: “God does not say: ‘In exchange for your own heart, I will give you a will of pure spirit.’ No, he gives us a heart, a human heart, like Christ’s. I don’t have one heart for loving God and another for loving people. I love Christ and the Father and the Holy Spirit and our Lady with the same heart with which I love my parents and my friends. I shall never tire of repeating this. We must be very human, for otherwise we cannot be divine.”⁸

We don’t choose our friends based on reasons of utility or pragmatism, thinking of what we will get out of this relationship. We love them simply for themselves, for who they are. “True friendship—like charity, which raises the human dimension of friendship to the supernatural plane—is a value in itself. It is not a means or an instrument.”⁹ Realizing that friendship is a gift prevents us from falling into a “superhero complex,” thinking that our job is to help everyone else, without realizing that we too need the help of others. Our path to heaven is not a list of goals to achieve, but a path that we share with our friends, an important part of which involves learning to

⁵ Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral Letter*, 1 November 2019, 8.

⁶ Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 151.

⁷ Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q.23, a.1.

⁸ Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 166.

⁹ Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral Letter*, 1 November 2019, 18.

welcome the affection they offer us. Friendship therefore requires a lot of humility in order to acknowledge that we are vulnerable and in need of human and divine affection. It means loving and letting ourselves be loved, as Jesus and the apostles did.

Those who are more introverted may find it harder to open their heart to another person, whether because they don't feel the need to do so or are afraid they won't be understood. Those who are more extroverted may find it easier to recount many experiences but they often don't know how to enrich their own interior world with the life experiences of others. In both cases, we all need to foster an attitude of openness and simplicity in order to let our friends enter into our own life and interior world. But opening ourselves to the gift of friendship, although it may sometimes require effort, can only end up making us happier.

We could all draw up a list of the important lessons we have learned from our friends. Our relationship with each one is different, and brings new light to all the corners of our soul. The great consolation that comes from knowing we are loved and accompanied leads us to want to do the same for the other person. Friendship, Saint John Paul II said, "means a sincere love, a love in two directions that desires only good for the other person, a love that leads to union and happiness."¹⁰

Knowing that another person calls us their "friend" can never lead to pride, but only to gratitude for this gift and the desire to accompany the other person on their path to happiness. "Nothing leads us to love others more readily than the realization, on the part of the one who is loved, that the person who loves us wants us to respond fully to that love."¹¹ When Jesus calls us his friends He does so always with this reciprocal force. "Jesus is your friend. The Friend. With a human heart, like yours. With loving eyes that wept for Lazarus. And he loves you as much as he loved Lazarus."¹² Each of our friendships is an opportunity to discover anew a reflection of the friendship that Christ offers us.

¹⁰ John Paul II, Address, 18 February 1988.

¹¹ Saint John Chrysostom, *Homily on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 14.

¹² Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 42.