

Putting the Civil Back in Civilization The Importance of Friendship in the 21st Century

INTRODUCTION

It can be difficult to have a healthy personal friendship these days in our society and this contributes to our civilization's loss of culture and specifically, the value of friendship. To put it another way, some people think society has gone to the dogs – no social structure, people have no real loyalty to one another, sex and violence chronically depicted on television and in movies. Moral virtue can sometimes be hard to find.

While it may not be as bleak as all that, the question becomes, what happened to moral virtue in personal friendships? It can probably be agreed that we need some help in our civilization to further our relationships with one another and with God. And it's not as if we are unaware of that fact. In a recent survey by the Pew Research Center regarding Religion and Public Life, 71% of those surveyed said that generally they did not think people today lead as good lives -honest and moral - as in the past, and further, 82% felt that young people today do not have as strong a sense of right and wrong as in the past ¹

Friendships should be viewed as important to the overall good of civilization. Friendships make it possible to be a part of community and to the overall social structure; they make it possible to bond with one another so that a community can be formed. As one philosopher put it, “[t]here is something that is so very obvious to everyone that it is in danger of becoming invisible: the need for civic friendship.”² It would be detrimental to

¹Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life; 2002 Religion and Public Life Survey, Final Topline, February 25- March 10, 2002, page 2 questions 2 & 3. March 20, 2002

²Ziegler, John. Philosophical Reflections, On Civic Friendships, *Universitas*, No. 9 (2001)

our society if we lose good, close friendships. If friendships are virtuous, society should follow.

There are two issues that come into play: first, when morals and values are compromised and/or nonexistent, not only do friendships suffer, but society as a whole suffers. Secondly, a number of “logistical” factors have contributed to the loss of true friendship, and a resulting loss of “civility.” For example: people moving further away in order to take a job, live in a preferential location, or for their health; busy or conflicting schedules of family and friends – working too much doesn’t leave a lot of quality social time; lingering resentments of family and friends; disputes over property; inheritance issues; death or illness; old age; competitiveness or rugged individualism could cause a loss of friendship and/or hurt feelings; the rising divorce rate affects not only the immediate family, but on related friendships; a calling to pursue a different career may leave others behind, or just the fact that people change.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

The Greek and Roman philosophers spoke of friendship and its place in society. The Roman writer and lawyer, Cicero, opined that friendship’s sweetness is the “sunshine of life.” He believed that there was nothing better adapted to human nature than friendship. Cicero defined friendship as, “a mutual harmony in affairs human and divine coupled with benevolence and charity.”

Aristotle believed that moral virtue was the most important aspect of happiness (the ultimate end) and friendship; moral virtue is seen as the essential way to achieve a good life and happiness included all of the goods to be realized. He listed three levels of friendships: use, pleasure and goodness (character). Aristotle believed that there are few “real”

friendships where character is the common bond and when one friend only wishes good for the other; however, he believed that many friendships were derived of utility and pleasure. He also believed that sometimes inequalities (master/slave; teachers/student) could make these friendships difficult. Many theologians, including Saint Thomas, used his Ethics on Friendship in their work. However, aspects of Christianity were not yet present so could not be introduced into Cicero or Aristotle's pagan ideologies. These are the most important to the concept of friendship, such as: loving your enemies; charity to all; the loving of all people, as opposed to preferential or selective love; suffering and pain of Christ for mankind; and friendship through Communion through God and others.

St. Augustine wrote on Christ's influence in friendships; he believed that the perfect friendship is the fusion of souls, "one love in two bodies." He agreed with Cicero that friendship requires a heart and a head. He believed that the ideas of reciprocity and benevolence (like Cicero and Aristotle) are necessary, but must be ordered to God. He also taught that with grace, mere mortals can be as loving as God. He saw the Trinity as the ultimate model for all human friendships. Friendship was described not just as a matter of fate, but a calling to God. There is a transformation from Philia to Agape with Christ, the idea that you should "lay down your life for your friends." Friendship, he wrote, depends on 1) similarity, 2) reciprocity, 3) intimate knowledge of other, 4) common love of God and 5) trust. Because of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we can relate to God and others in love and friendship, and consent in mutual willing of a real good.

St. Thomas also believed that the idea of friendship is enriched by Christ and that truth emerges from the friendship itself. He believed that it was important to love God and neighbor, and there were two sets of spiritual exercises, one vertical to God and the other

horizontal to neighbor. He wrote that divine love is the ultimate example of human love and that God brings about our capacity to love. Many philosophers after St. Thomas use his work on friendship as a reference for its strong presence of Christ. These works can be applied today, using examples from scripture and literature to show the importance of friendship to the good of our civilization.

PRESENT DAY

Today, it is clear that many of the Catholic traditional norms are not followed by our pluralistic society which was actually founded on the idea of rugged individualism. Relativism, or the idea that one norm is as good as another, is often advocated today. Unfortunately, relativism allows people the right to have their own interpretation of friendship, and often there are no moral compasses and/or no absolutes to make decisions with regard to relationships, specifically friendships.

The issue then becomes, what is important to people in the twenty-first century? Now we are in the post, post modern era where it seems that friendships take a back seat to matters of money, fame, prestige and in general, consumerism. To find a friend that believes in the same virtues and strives for good, doesn't always make it as a top priority. It may not fit into the average American lifestyle unless that friendship serves a good or pleasure. Along those lines, to take a job with the idea of doing something that makes a difference, and not just for the money, is a foreign concept today. It doesn't seem to phase some people to move to another area, (leaving behind friends and family), to take a position that offers more money or prestige. The choices that are made don't always relate to an examination of goods and virtues, and the overall value of friendship. This way of thinking is affecting our society as a whole. How do we determine the right thing to do

using Christ as an influence, to maintain a balance in our lives?

The Role of Virtue

In The Heart of Virtue, Donald DeMarco opines, “[i]t is not possible to improve our personal lives or our society if we don’t acquire virtue. Moral development can’t take place by way of ‘cultural osmosis’.” This opinion would be in line with many of the philosophers that discuss friendship, and the effects of virtue on friendship; for example, Saint Augustine: “we make a ladder out of our vices if we trample the vices under foot.”³ Saint Thomas: “the life of sin is a fall from coherence to chaos, the life of virtue a climb from the many to the One.”⁴ Most would agree that vices and virtues are at opposite ends of the friendship debate; virtue is seen as important to the development of character friendships; a friendship based on vice would not be much of a friendship at all. Loyalty in regards to friendship is a key to a virtuous friendship; a friend without loyalty lacks virtue just as a “doctor without care, a teacher without patience, a parent without prudence, a spouse without fidelity.”⁵ Virtue must accompany friendship in order for friendship to be good.

The Role of Religion

Another recent survey regarding Religion, also by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, had an interesting result. Even though people may think that moral life is declining, sixty-seven (67%) percent of those polled saw religion as the best way to

³DeMarco, Donald. “Prologue.” In The Heart of Virtue. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 13-17

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

strengthen moral behavior and family values. Public Agenda President, Deborah Wadsworth reasoned that the idea that Religion has power “is largely driven by an equally strong conclusion that American Society is suffering from an appalling death of morality.”⁶ Religion as a force is important, but how does that translate to life on a daily basis.

In a recent article, William Bennet, tries to propose a remedy for the decline of our culture; he sees the role of social institutions, including, families, churches, schools, neighborhoods and civic associations as the answer to assist our society and enable it to rise again.⁷ Obviously at the core of these organizations are people and therefore, friendships remain important to that core. Relationships in general and friendship in particular should be paramount when they pursue virtuous common goals that are in keeping with Christ’s teaching. When friends who are “kindred spirits” (and not just use or pleasure seeing) get together for some societal good, usually good things happen. In addition, since the meeting of friends is more than a happenstance or fate, but inspired by the Holy Spirit, according the St. Thomas and St. Augustine, this is also our way of knowing that God wants us to feel his presence. Our society would do well to follow the call to virtue. John Ziegler, regarding civic friendships, states,

Human society cannot be built on purely ‘useful’ friendships. That is what cements a mere gang of burglars: self interest is the motive of what we call ‘honour among thieves’. But human society, to be human, must depend on humanity in the very literal sense that its basis is human persons. Civic friendship is

⁶Zenit “Poll Finds Support for Religion in Public Life.” *National Catholic Register*. (January 21-27, 2001).

⁷Bennett, William J. “Quantifying America’s Decline.” *Wall Street Journal*. March 15, 1993.

indispensable to civic society.⁸

Further Catholic Thoughts on Friendship and Morality

Teleological Catholic Social thought is based on the ideal that the ends or purpose should be examined when evaluating moral situations. In other words, decisions regarding right and wrong, even in the area of friendships, are not based on the will of the person in authority (deontological) but in the God given will and intellect to select the end. St. Thomas stated that for the morality of an act to be good, the 1) objective of act must be good; 2) the intention of person acting must be good; and the 3) circumstances must be good. It would follow from this that friendships based on something other than good would not be morally good. The norms for decision making are based in the three theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Love assisted by the cardinal virtues of justice, temperance, fortitude and prudence. The virtues are perfectly modeled in Christ and were given to us by Christ to guide us and for us to use in order to evaluate our actions. Therefore it would follow, that choosing friends, and making ethical decisions during the course of a friendship, can be assisted by these principles. The idea of using prudence to decide between alternatives in an ethical dilemma regarding a friendship, and using conscience (one's last best judgment of choice of action), informed by prudence, assists us in our search for truth. This is applicable especially in our relations with others, especially for those closest to us, family and friends. We use our experiences and the experiences of our friends and others to help us make a judgment of conscience. This has a dramatic effect on our life and our relationships.

⁸Ziegler, John. "On Civic Friendship." *Universitas* Number 9 (2001);

In all actions with regards to friendship we must act and accept responsibility for our actions. If we advise a friend to do an immoral action, it is as if we are committing one ourselves. The importance of these virtues and principles shouldn't be forgotten in present day society where there may be a temptation to take the easy way out, or to make a decision based on monetary considerations. Issues involving friendships deserve the most important consideration based on Christ's teaching.

In addition, friendship signifies something more important, the union with one another is as a result of the fact that we are united in Christ. In John 13:34, 35, Jesus told his followers that they were to "love one another as I have loved you." St. Augustine and St. Thomas wrote that we are representatives of Christ. The addition of the teachings of Christ bring a deeper element into the friendship discussion, a friendship with another as a gift from God. There are other scripture examples that show how to care for our friends.⁹

The Role of the Church

Fr. Benedict J. Groeschel, talks about Cardinal John Henry Newman as someone who loved friendship and considered it to be a blessing to have good friends. Cardinal Newman wrote an essay regarding the pain he suffered when he left the Anglican community for the Catholic Church. His search for the truth compelled him to move to Catholic thought to find the answers.

And my brethren, O kind and affectionate hearts, O loving friends,
should you know any one whose lot it has been, by writing or word
of mouth, in some degree to help you thus to act; if he has ever told
you what you knew about yourselves, or what you did not know;

⁹Encourage one another (1 Thess. 5:11; Heb. 3:13; 10:25); Admonish one another (Col. 3:16; Rom. 15:14); Confess your sins to one another (Jas. 5:16); Forgive one another (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13); Accept one another (Rom. 14:1; 15:7); Serve one another (Gal. 5:13; Rom. 12:10); Build up one another (1 Thess. 5:11); Be hospitable to one another (1 Pet. 4:9)

has read to you your wants or feelings, and comforted you by the very reading; has made you feel that there was a higher life than this daily one, and a brighter world than that you see; or encouraged you, or sobered you, or opened a way to the inquiring, or soothed the perplexed; if what he has said or done has ever made you take interest in him, and feel well inclined towards him; remember such a one in time to come, though you hear him not, and pray for him that in all things he may know God's will and at all times may be ready to fulfill it.¹⁰

The role of the Church in friendship is to help the person make the judgment in conscience and preserve the deposit of faith (tradition, scripture and teaching of the Church) of one generation to the next. Scripture examples play a large role in depicting friendship in Christ and for many people, they are the only way they will read about Christ's presence in friendship.

EXAMPLES OF FRIENDSHIP

Scripture examples of friendship

In the Old Testament, God's love was depicted as friendship with Abraham and Moses, in the form of a covenant.

In the New Testament, Christ has many friends but he is also abandoned by his friends. Christ who loved and was loved by his friends, was like us in many ways. In his pain, sorrow and humiliation, he was betrayed by his friends and left alone. Not only his sacrifice for his friends was important, but it was important to see how he loved them without preference. In addition, the New Testament also shows a strong bond of friendship between Christ and Mary Magdalene and also Mary, Margaret, Lazarus, and John.

¹⁰John Henry Newman, *Sermons Bearing on Subjects of the Day*, Sermon 26 (New York: Longman, Green, 1902) 395.

There is also in scripture the examples of friendship in Acts of the Apostles, they “continuously devoted themselves to fellowship” (Acts 2:42). Another word for fellowship is Koinonia, which can be translated to mean, “to have in common” or “to share.” Koinonia bridges the gap between Philia and Agape. There are examples in Acts of meetings that took place where people met in homes and in large groups (See Acts 2:46; 20:20; Rom. 16.5). Acts also shows details of the Apostles early life and examples of this fellowship. The way of prayer and sharing of goods, the early attempts at organization (13:1) and celebration of the Eucharist (2:42). By this example of scripture, friendship can be seen, through Saint Thomas, that as lovers of God affected by the Holy Spirit, we can relate to others in love and friendship.

It is not merely fate that brings people together as friends, but it is that the idea of friendship is viewed with the knowledge that God is with us always. The fellowship that was founded in Christ was started initially with friendship, the idea that friendship should be self sacrificing is an important part of the Christian contribution to the virtue of friendships.

Examples of Moral decisions in friendships- Case Study from literature

Friendship can also be found in secular arenas also; in fact, strong examples of friendship can be found in classical literature. In The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, “Huck” gets tired of civilization, fakes his death, and runs away from his alcoholic father. While he is floating down the Mississippi River on a raft, he meets Jim, who he knows is a runaway slave. He is opposed to slavery and the book portrays not only his friendship with Jim, but his moral struggles with regard to slavery and other issues. Huck’s preconceived knowledge about the issue of slavery is upset by his own conscience. Using his own principles, he comes to the decision that slavery is wrong and that his relationship with Jim

is important. Therefore, the relationship becomes deeper. Furthermore, although society would view Jim as a slave and say he should be turned in, Huck views Jim as an equal and a friend, and therefore, not as property. Their relationship is based on good and because of the honesty between them, Huck is able to see Jim as a person with feelings and soul, and is able to throw away the stereotypes that he has been taught. He comes to the conclusion that he is right (and therefore society is wrong) with regards to the treatment of slaves.

How would this story be analyzed by the classical philosophers? Aristotle would probably say that the relationship between the two probably started as a friendship of usefulness but becomes one of character, and is therefore virtuous. He would say that happiness or Eudaimonia should be pursued and that the characters are in agreement on the goods and their similarity in virtue. There is unity in their goals and because they and their goals are virtuous, the friendship may be considered good, even if the people themselves may not be considered “perfect” by society. The fact that they are not “equal” should not be a problem since Jim is not Huck’s slave and is not considered one by Huck. St. Augustine would probably view their friendship as virtuous and harmonious with one another, he would point to the Christlike aspects – opposition to a moral wrong – slavery; the fact that Huck did not turn in his friend is important, since Huck could have been in major trouble for doing that during that time period. By Catholic standards, not turning him in can be seen as an example of Christ’s teaching, of “laying down one’s life for one’s friends and to love one another as I have loved you.” St. Thomas would analyze it with the introduction of the virtues as modeled after Christ and would see the presence of Christ in the relationship; he would state that the friendship was good and that slavery was evil. He would also see the agape characteristics of the friendship as good.

An analysis of this book could be a paper in itself, but the example shows not only the personal relationship as a good, but the importance of the friendship to the goods that are needed in the overall society (abolition of slavery); and the great danger if that powerful relationship is eroded.

CONCLUSION

In our present society, the role of Christian morals and ethics helps to make friendships that are lasting and united in Christ. While Aristotle and Cicero had a lot of good things to say about friendship, they were lacking the contribution of Christ's message and the result of Christianity's influence on friendship. To put back the civil in civilization and to insure a "rise" instead of a decline in our culture, we will need to model our friendships after Christ and use this basis as a role for all of our social institutions. The modern world has many moral dilemmas, and is often grounded in the ideas of rugged individualism and pluralism, however, to keep Christ's example, to love one another as I have loved you, would answer many questions and help to put back the good in our society. Joan Chittister, OSB, states it succinctly,

The fact is that simply living with people does not by itself create community . . . We have to share a common vision. We have to want good for one another . . . Even liking one another is not enough. The truth about Christian community is that we have to be committed to the same eternal things together. What we want to live for and how we intend to live out those values are the central questions of community.¹¹

And finally, just as we saw in the examples of friendship in scripture and literature; the complexity, the dilemmas, the tests of faith, and the difficult moral choices involved, we

¹¹Living grace-Fully, A Reflection on Spirit-led Community as Practiced at Pendle Hill. copyright 1996-2000 Pendle Hill <http://www.pendlehill.org/living.htm>

can see how these human and spiritual experiences transcended the theoretical models. In the end, there is ultimately a subjective relationship between friendship, faith, God, and being on our own. Sometimes friendship is a blessing from God and sometimes it is a friendship with God, as found in the following prayer.

Prayer

O LORD JESUS CHRIST, thank you for leaving me the example of your sorrow and aloneness in the Garden of Olives. Without that example, it would be so much more difficult for me to go when no one is there for me. I am grateful for all those whom you have given me along the way as loving friends and also for the charge you have given me to be a friend to others. But sooner or later we must all go on alone – and there is always that place in my heart where no one can come but you. Without your presence, that inner solitude becomes oppressive, even devastating – a wasteland of howling winds and dark nights. But when you are there with me – and only you can come there – my whole life is filled with light and I can go on even in the midst of great trials.

Be with me, Lord, in the dark time, and let me rise from the darkness because you are there. Be that friend who brings to me all that I may have lost – the love of mother and father, of sister and brother, of friend and teacher. When the final hours of this journey come and I must leave all behind, walk with me down the corridor that has neither steps nor time. Protect me from the enemies of my soul and from the snarling voice of the accuser. Give me your hand and I shall be saved.

For the rest, let me be a loyal friend to many as they struggle in life, and let me be just and forgiving to my enemies. Let me not expect more of friends than they can give – but let me give them more than they expect. Let me know expect too much of others who, like myself, struggle under the burden of life, but rather let me be, as best I can, a friend who does not fail. May we be friends in you, the Changeless Friend of us all.

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Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life; 2002 Religion and Public Life Survey, Final Topline, February 25- March 10, 2002, March 20, 2002.