



I have called you friends

**Friendship, a gift from God
to light up the earth**

Edited by ANDRÉS CÁRDENAS

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Foreword

Andrés Cárdenas

“Who do people say that I am?”, Jesus asks as he walks with his disciples. A wide variety of ideas are circulating, perhaps based on prejudice, rumour, or some isolated piece of news (cf. Mk 8:27-28). But his friends know him. “You are the Christ”, says Peter, who has been sharing his days with the Lord for years, ever since he was called to be a *fisher of men* (cf. Mt 4:19). Martha, Mary and Lazarus, his friends in Bethany, could add familiar details: you are the one who has that way about you... you are the only one who knows that about me... you are the person I look to when I need to talk about this... Among his friends, Jesus is known in an authentic way. There are no masks: each one is loved simply for who he is.

The pages that make up this little book are an invitation to experience the joy of loving and being loved, and to do so from God’s affection. That is why they begin by exploring a surprising piece of news from Sacred Scripture: God has friends; our Creator himself seeks us out because he longs to walk with us (cf. Gen 3:8-9). On this journey we will hear how Jesus tells us that Christians will be known by the way they love (cf. Jn 13:35); we will recall how St. Josemaría, after the Spanish Civil War, *rebuilt* Opus Dei on the only thing that had not been physically destroyed: an inscription with the Lord’s new commandment (cf. Jn 13:34). And finally, we will consider what particular features friendship acquires for a Christian today.

Friendship is undoubtedly one of God’s greatest gifts to us. He wants each one of us to be eager to be a home like Bethany for Jesus and for others; to be enthusiastic about constantly turning our hearts into a bright home where everyone can find a place.

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1. Does God Have Friends?

Giulio Maspero and Andrés Cárdenas

A question we've often heard in the messages on our cell phone is probably "Where are you?" And we will also have sent it to our friends and relatives to seek their company and find out how they are doing. Where are you? What are you doing? Is everything fine? These are also the words that God addresses to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, "when they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen 3:8). The Creator wants to walk alongside Adam and Eve. We could say, with a certain daring, that God was seeking their friendship – and now ours – in order to see his plan for creation fully carried out.

A novelty that grows ever stronger

This possibility, though perhaps not totally new for us, has been seen as quite strange in the history of human thought. In fact, at the height of Greek wisdom, Aristotle had accepted with resignation the impossibility of being God's friend, since too great a disproportion, too great a difference existed between human beings and God.¹ At best, it was possible to render servile homage to the deity through certain rites or practices, or attain at least some conceptual knowledge of the godhead. But a relationship of friendship was beyond imagining.

Nevertheless, Sacred Scripture often presents our relationship with God as a friendship. The book of Exodus is very clear in this regard: *the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend* (Ex 33:11). In the Song of Songs, which presents the relationship between God and the soul seeking Him in a poetic way, the soul is often addressed as "my friend" (cf. *Song* 1:15). The book of Wisdom says that *in every generation she [wisdom] passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God* (Wis 7:27). It is striking how in each case the initiative belongs to God. The covenant He has established with his creation is not "symmetric," as though it were a contract between equals. Rather it is "asymmetric": we have been granted the disconcerting possibility of

speaking with our Creator face to face, as though He were on our own level.

This possibility of friendship that God offers us, this novelty that He grants us, grew ever stronger throughout the course of salvation history. Everything revealed to us in the Old Covenant is definitively illumined by the Son of God's life on earth: "God loves us not merely as creatures but as children to whom, in Christ, He offers true friendship."² Jesus' whole life is an invitation to friendship with his Father. He transmits this good news to us with special force and clarity during the Last Supper. There, in the Cenacle, with each of his gestures Jesus opens his Heart in order to lead his disciples – and we with them – to true friendship with God.

From dust to life

Saint John's gospel is divided into two parts: the first is centred on Christ's preaching and miracles, and the second on his Passion, Death and Resurrection. The bridge uniting them is the following verse that introduces us into the Cenacle: *Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end (Jn 13:1)*. Present there were Peter and John, Thomas and Philip, and the other eight apostles, all reclining on their side, as was the custom at that time. In light of John's narration, it was probably a three-sided U-shaped table. Jesus would have sat in the first place, and Peter opposite him, where the servant usually sat, possibly face to face with Jesus. At one point Jesus rises and carries out a service that perhaps his Mother had often done for Him when He was a young boy: taking a towel and bowl and washing the dust off the feet of his friends.

The image of dust is present right from the first pages of Sacred Scripture. In the creation narrative we read that *the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground (Gen 2:7)*. To raise up dust from an inanimate substance, dead and unable to relate to others, God *breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being (Ibid.)*. From then on man has experienced the tension of being both dust and

spirit, facing his radical limits and his infinite desires. But God is much stronger than our weaknesses and betrayals.

In the Cenacle, the dust we are made of once again appears. Christ bends over the dust on the feet of his friends to recreate them, restoring to them a relationship with the Father. Jesus “washes our feet,” divinizing the dust we are made of, and enables us to share in the intimate friendship He has with his Father. Amid this moving atmosphere of intimacy, He tells his disciples: *I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you* (Jn 15:15). Jesus shares with us his life, his capacity to love, to forgive, to be a friend to the end.

We have all experienced how a good friendship has changed us; perhaps we wouldn't be the same person we are today without it. Being a friend of God also transforms our ability to be friends of those around us. Like Christ, we can wash their feet, sit at the table with someone who might betray us, offer our affection to someone who doesn't understand us or who refuses our friendship. The mission of a Christian in the middle of the world is to “open out like a fan”³ to those around them, because God continues infusing his breath into the dust we are made of and illumines these relationships with his light.

Towards communion

We have seen that the friendship Jesus offers us is a sign of God's unconditional trust in us. After twenty centuries, in our daily life Christ continues telling us all that He knows about his Father in order to draw us to his friendship. But we have to respond personally. “We respond to this friendship by uniting our will to His, by doing what our Lord wants (cf. Jn 15:14).”⁴

True friends live in communion; in the depths of their soul they want the same things, and desire the other person's happiness. At times words aren't even needed to understand one another; it has even been said that laughing at the same things is one of the greatest signs of a shared intimacy. With God, this communion is much more than an exhausting effort to fulfil certain requirements – an attitude not suited

to friendship. Rather it means spending time with the other person, accompanying one another.

Saint John, the fourth evangelist, is a good example for us. After letting Jesus wash his feet, he reclined trustingly on our Lord's chest during the Supper. Afterwards, perhaps without understanding very well everything that was happening, he refused to abandon his best Friend and accompanied Him in all his suffering. The beloved disciple let himself be "transformed" by Jesus, and thus little by little God removed the dust from his heart. "Our redemption is brought about in this communion of wills: being friends of Jesus, to become friends of God. The more we love Jesus, the more we know Him, the more our true freedom develops and our joy in being redeemed flourishes."⁵

At the Last Supper, Jesus shows us the secret of being a good friend: *As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me (Jn 15:4)*. Jesus wants to make use of our heart to love others. Without Him we cannot be friends right to the end. "No matter how much you may love, you will never love enough," St Josemaría tells us. And he continues: *If you love Our Lord, there will not be a single creature that does not find a place in your heart.*⁶

"Where are you?" God asked our first parents. Today too He wants to enter into a dialogue with us. Not even the most brilliant philosopher has imagined a God who sought out our company, who so greatly yearned for our friendship that He allowed Himself to be nailed to a Cross so that He would always have his arms wide open for us. Having entered into this madness of love, we too feel spurred to open our arms generously to everyone around us and ask: "Where are you?" "Is everything going well?" And through the friendship we offer them we can help restore the beauty of creation.

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2. To light up the earth

José Manuel Antuña

The source of the world's great rivers is usually a small spring located high in the mountains. As the rivulet rushes downhill it is fed by other tributaries and streams until it becomes a broad river flowing towards the sea.

In a similar way, a spontaneous affection or common interest can be the source that gives rise to a new friendship. This strengthening relationship is fed by streams that nourish it: time spent together, confiding in one another, mutual advice, conversations, laughter... Just as the flowing river makes the fields fertile and creates beautiful ponds and lakes, friendship makes life beautiful and fills it with light; it “multiplies our joys and offers comfort in our sorrows.”⁷ Moreover, in a Christian, friendship is enriched with the “living water” of Christ's grace (cf. Jn 4:10). This force gives the current a new impetus; it transforms human affection into charity. Then, at the end of its path, the river flows into the vast sea of God's love for us.

An enormous coefficient of expansion

In the first pages of the Bible, in the account of man's creation, we read that man was formed in God's “*image and likeness*” (cf. *Gen 1:26*). This divine “model” is always present in the depths of the human; if we purify our sight we can glimpse aspects of God in each man and woman. Because of this great dignity, every person we encounter on our path in life is worthy of being loved: those we meet at work, at school, when playing sports or when walking along the street... But we will be able to establish a relationship of friendship only with a small number of them. We realize that we can't, in practice, have an unlimited number of friends, among other reasons because our time is limited. But our heart, with God's help, can always remain open, offering its friendship to as many people as possible, *showing every consideration for all men* (*Tit 3:2*).

The effort “not to exclude anyone,” to be “intentionally open, with a big heart, to every person”⁸ certainly will cause us to suffer. St Josemaría’s mother, for example, on seeing how her son gave himself unstintingly to those around him, warned him: “You are going to suffer a lot in life, because you put your whole heart into everything you do.”⁹ Opening our heart in friendship comes with a cost, but we have all experienced that it is a sure path to happiness. Moreover, we can grow continuously in our capacity to love ever more friends. St Josemaría’s heart, as the number of people in Opus Dei increased, gave rise to this concern: will I be able to love all those who come to the Work with the same affection I felt for the first ones? It was a concern that divine grace resolved, as he felt God continuously expanding his heart, so much so that he exclaimed: *The human heart is endowed with an enormous coefficient of expansion. When it loves, it opens out in a crescendo of affection that overcomes all barriers.*¹⁰

By this they will know you...

The book of Genesis reveals God’s love for us in creating us in his image. But with the incarnation of his Son, we see a much more moving proof of this love. Jesus’ apostles lived alongside Him for three years, finding in Him their best friend. They called Him *Rabbi*, which means “teacher,” since besides being his friends, they realized they were his disciples. Before suffering, our Lord wanted them to know that He loved them with a love stronger than death, that He loved them *to the end* (Jn 13:1). This “secret” of the radical nature of his friendship is one of the intimate truths that Christ confided to them at the Last Supper. There He also revealed his desire that this truth be perpetuated down through the centuries for all Christians by the proclamation of a new commandment: *that you love one another, even as I have loved you* (Jn 13:34). And Jesus insisted: *By this all men will know that you are my disciples* (Jn 13:35). My friends will be recognized by how they love others.

An event in Opus Dei’s history is closely tied to this new commandment. At the end of the Spanish civil war, when St Josemaría returned to Madrid he went directly to no. 16 Ferraz Street, where the

new DYA residence had been opened just days before the war broke out. Now, almost three years later, he found everything destroyed by the bombing and sacking. The building was in ruins. Amid the rubble, covered in dust, he came upon a plaque he had placed on a wall in the library. In the form of a parchment, it contained the words of Jesus' new commandment written in Latin: *mandatum novum do vobis...* St Josemaría had put it there as a reminder of the atmosphere he wanted for the centres of Opus Dei: "places where many people find a sincere love and learn to be true friends."¹¹ With the destructive war now over, and needing to start again almost from scratch, one of the key foundations for rebuilding would be Christ's new commandment of love.

It is easier then to climb

The model for the new law is Jesus' love: *as I have loved you (Jn 13:34)*. But what was his love like? What are its characteristics? Christ's love for his apostles, as He himself said, is a love like that found between friends. They have been witnesses to and recipients of the intensity of this love. They saw how Jesus cared for those alongside Him, how He shared in their joys (cf. *Lk 10:21*) and also in their sufferings (cf. *Jn 11:35*). He always had time for those who needed Him: for the Samaritan woman (cf. *Jn 4:6*), for the woman with a haemorrhage (cf. *Mk 5:32*), and even for the good thief hanging beside him on the Cross (cf. *Lk 23:43*). Jesus' affection was shown by a concern for people's specific needs: for the food needed by those who were following Him (cf. *Lk 9:13*), and also for their rest (cf. *Mk 6:31*). As Pope Francis reminds us, Jesus had a true "friendship with his disciples, and even in moments of crisis He remained faithful to them."¹²

Friendship is both a balm for our life and a gift that God gives us. It is not merely a fleeting sentiment but rather a true love that is "stable, firm and faithful, and matures with the passage of time."¹³ Some people even view it as the highest expression of love since it enables us to value the other person for his or her own sake. Friendship means "seeing the other person not as someone to make use of but as someone to serve."¹⁴ This is its marvellous freedom. We can understand

then why a lack of self-interest is intrinsic to friendship, since the intention of the one who loves is not to seek any benefit for oneself or a possible “boomerang” effect.

To discover this reality in all its true depth is always a surprise, since it seems to clash with the view of life as competition that is quite widespread today. Hence friendship is often experienced as an unmerited gift; with friends the problems of life seem easier to bear. As a *kikuyu* proverb that Blessed Alvaro del Portillo liked a lot says: “When a friend is waiting for us on the top of the mountain, it is easier to climb it.”¹⁵

Friends are absolutely necessary for a happy life. Certainly, a fulfilled life is possible without married love (as happens, for example, with those who have received the gift of celibacy). But one cannot be happy without experiencing the love of friendship. How much consolation and joy we find in a good friendship! How greatly our sorrows are lightened!

My friends for Jesus

By coming to know the life of Jesus and growing in intimacy with Him we can learn the features of a perfect friendship. We saw above that Christian friendship is special since it draws nourishment from a divine torrent, God’s grace, and thus acquires a new “Christological dimension.” This new focus spurs us to see and love all men and women – especially those closest to us – “through Christ, with Him and in Him,” as the priest says at Mass when raising up Jesus in the Eucharistic Bread. We learn “to see others through Christ’s eyes, always rediscovering their value.”¹⁶ St Josemaría urged us to be Christ passing by for the people around us, to give others the same love of friendship as Christ’s. Hence we want to nourish in our prayer this human and supernatural eagerness to always be seeking new friends, since “God often makes use of an authentic friendship to carry out his saving work.”¹⁷

Jesus’ friendship with Peter, with John and with all his disciples is expressed in his ardent desire that they may live close to the Father; his

friendship is united to his eagerness that they discover the mission they have been called to. Likewise, in the midst of the tasks that our Lord has entrusted to each of us, “It is not a question of having friends in order to do apostolate, but of making sure that the Love of God fills our friendship so that it is genuine apostolate.”¹⁸ St Josemaría said that in our spiritual life there should come a time when we can’t distinguish prayer and work, because we live constantly in God’s presence. Something similar happens with friendship, since in desiring the good of our friend we want that person to be as close as possible to God, the sure source of joy. Hence “there are no shared moments that are not apostolic: everything is friendship and everything is apostolate, without being able to distinguish them.”¹⁹

The heart of a saint always has room for a new friend. In books about their lives we see their sincere interest in others’ problems, in their sorrows and joys. Blessed Alvaro tried to foster this attitude right to the end of his life; he wanted to bring Christ’s friendship to everyone around him. A day after his death, just after his final trip on earth, “they found on his night table the visiting card of one of the pilots of the plane that had brought him back from the Holy Land to Rome. He had spoken with him and asked about his family, while waiting in the Tel Aviv airport. The relationship was brief but quite strong; the pilot went to pray before the mortal remains of Don Alvaro as soon as he heard about his death.”²⁰ That brief encounter led to a friendship that continued between heaven and earth.

A Christian has a great love – a gift – to share. Our relationships with others give Christ the chance to offer his friendship to new friends. “Lighting up the pathways of the earth”²¹ involves spreading throughout the world the precious reality of the love of friendship. If we are thinking only about our own interests, if we are in too much of a hurry and are satisfied with a superficial relationship with people, we can endanger this gift that God wants us to share with everyone. A large part of our evangelizing mission is to restore to friendship its authentic value, its relationship with God, with the desire to improve... In the end, with happiness.

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3. A Reciprocal Love

María del Rincón Yohn

Each of our friendships is an opportunity to discover anew a reflection of the friendship that Christ offers us

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 clamours 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."²² 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 reciprocal reality 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!"²³

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 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 wonderful conversations must have taken place in the house at Bethany, with Lazarus, Martha and Mary!*"²⁴

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.”²⁵ 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 our own, that enrich our inner world, and, when the friendship is deep, that enable us to experience the world in a different way.”²⁶ C. S. Lewis, who had many deep friendships, said with his special sense of humour 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)."²⁷ 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.²⁸

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, St Josemaría 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."*²⁹

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."³⁰ 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 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, St 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."³¹

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."³² 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.*"³³ Each of our friendships is an opportunity to discover anew a reflection of the friendship that Christ offers us.

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4. Fraternity and Friendship

Andrés Cárdenas

In the late 1940s, Zurbaran, one of the first university residences for women in Madrid, has the custom of spending one night each month in a vigil to adore Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Getting up by turns throughout the night to accompany our Lord is a moving experience for the young university women.

Blessed Guadalupe, the Director, is in charge of organizing this overnight vigil. She stays awake in her office close to the oratory writing letters, in case one of the young women wants to share, amid the silence of the night, her dreams, resolutions, concerns... Guadalupe sets aside her sleep in order to offer everyone her friendship. It isn't surprising that those who knew her remember her "extraordinary facility for making friends. Guadalupe clearly had a special gift for getting along with people, an attractive warmth and many human virtues. But what I would like to stress here is her strong sense of friendship."³⁴

Fraternity becomes friendship

Friendship is always freely bestowed; if it is sought to fulfil an obligation or to attain a goal it is never truly authentic. Guadalupe, for example, wasn't skipping hours of sleep because she was obliged to do so, nor were the young women eager to stop for a while in her office because they had to render an account to her, especially at those hours of the night. Guadalupe shared something in common with each of the women that made them eager to open their hearts to one another. Perhaps one of them was also studying chemistry, or shared her desire to travel widely, or had recently lost her father as had Guadalupe. And perhaps they also shared an eagerness to grow in their interior life or even the vocation to Opus Dei.

When reflecting on the variety of interests that we may share in common with others, Saint John Chrysostom remarked: "If merely being from the same city is enough for many people to become friends, what should our love for one another be like, who have the same home,

the same table, the same path, the same door, the same Life, the same Head; the same Shepherd and King and Master and Judge and Creator and Father?”³⁵

The Prelate of Opus Dei, whom many people call “Father” because he presides over a family, said that “there is a very close connection between fraternity and friendship. Beginning with the simple relationship of being children of the same parents, fraternity becomes friendship through love and affection among the siblings.”³⁶

St Josemaría, in 1974, began a get-together with supernumerary sons of his in Argentina by saying: *“I ask you today, right at the start, to live your fraternity in such a way that when someone is suffering you don’t leave him alone, and neither when he has a reason to be joyful. This isn’t insurance for this life; it’s insurance for eternal life.”*³⁷

God’s finger is here

It was also in Argentina, in 1902, that Isidoro Zorzano was born, in a Spanish family. Three years later the family returned to Europe, to the city of Logroño, where as an adolescent Isidoro would come to know St Josemaría. The two quickly became friends, although one planned to study engineering and the other would soon enter the seminary. But they stayed in contact and their letters testify to their ongoing friendship. “My dear friend: Since I’m more rested now, I can meet you any afternoon you like; you only need to send me a card. A hug from your good friend Isidoro.”³⁸ While Josemaría, now living in the Spanish capital, would write: “Dear Isidoro: When you come to Madrid be sure to come to see me. I have some very interesting things to tell you. A hug from your good friend.”³⁹

Soon, when Isidoro turned 29, a crucial moment in his life arrived. He sensed in his heart that God was asking him for something, and his friend Josemaría wanted to speak with him about Opus Dei, which was just beginning. One meeting was enough; they spoke about seeking sanctity in the middle of the world. Isidoro realized that God had made use of this friendship to grant him the vocation to the Work. The

relationship that had united them since adolescence, their mutual interests, took on new strength and led Isidoro to write: “God’s finger is here.”⁴⁰

It’s only natural that Isidoro’s discovery of his vocation didn’t set aside the affective ties of his long-standing friendship with St Josemaría. God has created us as both soul and body; sharing in the supernatural life He offers us doesn’t undo the natural goods in our life. We see an example of this in Jesus, who shared his life with his friends. As St Josemaría said: “God Our Lord wants there to be in the Work both Christian charity and our life shared humanly with others, which becomes supernatural fraternity, and not merely a formal fulfilment.”⁴¹ Our affection is not something “spiritual;” rather it is something specific, made a reality in our human interactions with each person. Much more than a formal relationship based merely on good manners or courtesy, it requires trying to love everyone as their own mother would.

On 14 July 1943, ten years after that crucial encounter in Madrid, both friends – now related as father and son in a supernatural family – had their last conversation. They may have recalled their adolescent years, the letters they exchanged, their efforts to get the DYA Academy and the first student residence underway, the dramatic events during the civil war, Isidoro being diagnosed with cancer.... When saying goodbye, St Josemaría opens his heart to Isidoro: “I ask our Lord to give me a death like yours.”⁴² Jesus said: *Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends (Jn 15:13)*. This was Isidoro’s greatest desire during his final days: to continue helping and being united to everyone in the Work from heaven as he had tried to do on earth.

The least jealous of loves

We all know that in many human relationships the objective bond that exists – between husband and wife, or between brothers and sisters – does not automatically lead to friendship. Moreover the fact that a true friendship exists at some point in life does not guarantee that this relationship is immune to the normal effects of the passage of time.

Cardinal Ratzinger, when reflecting on the topic of supernatural fraternity, pointed out with realism that “siblings are not automatically the quintessence of love and equality ... Even brotherhood must be redeemed, as it were, and pass through the Cross in order to find its proper form.”⁴³

“The fraternity that arises from a shared vocation to the Work also needs to be expressed in friendship,”⁴⁴ the Prelate of Opus Dei insisted. And like other relationships where human freedom enters in, friendship doesn’t arise automatically. It requires the patient effort of getting to know another person, opening up our own interior world in order to enrich it with what God wants to give us through others. The get-togethers and family events, for example, where we open ourselves to the others, are opportunities to create bonds of true friendship. Nothing that concerns the lives of the others – worries, joys, sorrows, interests – can fail to touch us personally. Creating a home with light-filled corridors and doors open to the others is also part of one’s personal growth and maturing. “As a spiritual being, the human creature is defined through interpersonal relations. The more authentically we live these relations, the more our own personal identity matures. It is not by isolation that we establish our worth, but by placing ourselves in relation with others and with God.”⁴⁵

When friendship is authentic, it doesn’t seek to “take possession” of another person. On the contrary, in experiencing the great good of friendship, we want to share our friendship with many others. True friendship teaches us how to make many more friends; we learn how to enjoy the company of other people, although naturally we won’t have a close friendship with all of them. C. S. Lewis, when distinguishing the different forms of love, said that “true friendship is the least jealous of loves. Two friends delight to be joined by a third, and three by a fourth, if only the newcomer is qualified to become a real friend. They can then say, as the blessed souls say in Dante, ‘Here comes one who will augment our loves.’ For in this love ‘to divide is not to take away.’”⁴⁶ In heaven, each of the blessed will increase the joy of everyone else, sharing his or her personal vision of God with the others.

In his *Confessions*, St Augustine gives a moving account of the joy he drew from his friends: “to discourse and jest with them; to indulge in an interchange of kindnesses; to read together pleasant books; together to trifle, and together to be earnest; to differ at times without ill-humour, as a man would do with his own self; and even by the infrequency of these differences to give zest to our more frequent consentings; sometimes teaching, sometimes being taught; longing for the absent with impatience, and welcoming the coming with joy. These and similar expressions, emanating from the hearts of those who loved and were beloved in return, by the countenance, the tongue, the eyes, and a thousand pleasing movements, were so much fuel to melt our souls together, and out of many to make but one.”⁴⁷

“Our personal happiness does not depend on the successes we achieve, but rather on the love we receive and the love we give.”⁴⁸ It depends on knowing we are loved and have a home we can always return to no matter what happens, where our presence is irreplaceable. This is what St Josemaría wanted the homes of his sons and daughters to be like. And this is how people remembered Opus Dei’s first apostolic undertaking in Madrid, in 1936. “If one first went to the Luchana apartment thanks to an invitation, one stayed thanks to friendship.”⁴⁹

This is the lovable bond that, humanly speaking, can preserve unity. “*If you love one another, each of our houses will be the home that I have foreseen, what I would like each of our Centres to be. And each of your brothers will have a holy hunger to return home, after a long day of work; and then he will be eager to set forth anew, to this holy war, this war of peace.*”⁵⁰

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5. See what good friends they are

Ricardo Calleja.

In the late second century, Christians living in the Roman Empire were being violently persecuted. A jurist named Tertullian, who had embraced Christianity not long before, wanted to vouch for his brothers and sisters in the faith, whom he now knew much more about. He does so through a treatise to inform the governors of the Roman provinces about the true life of those who were being unjustly accused. He himself had admired Christians even without being one, especially the martyrs. But now, repeating the opinion of many citizens, Tertullian sums up what people are saying about these small Christian communities: “See how they love one another!”⁵¹

We have many testimonies of the friendships between the first Christians. At the beginning of the same century a bishop, St Ignatius of Antioch, who was being brought to Rome for martyrdom, wrote a letter to the young bishop Polycarp. Among other pieces of advice, he exhorts Polycarp to treat “with meekness” those who are far from the Church, since it would have no merit to love only “good disciples.”⁵² Indeed, we know that Christ makes himself present in history through his Church, through his sacraments and Sacred Scripture, but also through the charity with which we Christians treat those around us. Friendship is one of the “divine paths on earth”⁵³ that God has opened up by becoming a man, a friend of his friends. We sense here in a special way the mysterious cooperation between God’s initiative and our correspondence.

Hence for Christ to reach others through our relationships, we need to grow in virtue and in the art of friendship; we need to develop our capacity to love others and to love with others, with an eagerness to share our life with others. We want to form our character – or reform it – so that we can truly love others and develop strong connections with them. We want even our gestures, our way of speaking and working to help others to draw close to us. And always with an awareness of our

own way of being and our personal limitations, since there are infinite ways to be a good friend.

Side by side

As C. S. Lewis remarked: “Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest.”⁵⁴ Friends not only love their friends; they love *with* them. Friends take an ardent interest in the activities, projects and ideals of their friends. A friendship often springs up simply from sharing in the effort to achieve a true common good, and thus friends grow together in the virtues required to achieve it.

Therefore, how much it helps to be enthusiastic about good goals, to have noble ambitions. This can be a professional or academic undertaking; a cultural, educational or artistic initiative such as reading books or listening to music in a group, or promoting activities for the general public. It could also be a social or civic service project, or a formative initiative, such as a youth or family club, or an activity aimed at spreading the Christian message. Friendship is also strengthened by sharing in household tasks such as decorating and cooking, do-it-yourself projects, gardening or practising sports, excursions, games and other hobbies. All these activities are an opportunity to enjoy another person’s company, where mutual trust and openness to other dimensions of one’s own life grow little by little.

In contrast, anyone who faces life in a merely functional way, viewing everything from a purely practical point of view, will see their capacity to make friends greatly diminished. They will have, at most, collaborators in certain useful tasks or accomplices to pass the time. Then friendship is “instrumentalized,” since it is put at the service of a project centred on oneself.

“This is what it should be like”

But friendship is not just *doing things together*. It needs to be “*personal* friendship, self-sacrificing and sincere: one to one, heart to heart.”⁵⁵ Although among friends words aren’t always needed, friends often have

good conversations. And it is an art to learn to how to have a good conversation, with one or more people. Those who want to grow in friendship need to avoid a hectic activism and seek suitable times to spend time together, without looking at their watches or mobile phones. This personal exchange can be greatly assisted by the appropriate place and environment. St Josemaría attached great importance to the material installation of the centers of the Work, so that their good taste and family air would foster an atmosphere that facilitated friendship.

Inviting someone to join a group of friends, in order to share an inspiring experience or their reflections on an interesting topic, often helps to improve the level of conversation. The reading of books in common can also be helpful, since it involves taking part in the great debate with the authors of the past and the present, where many new fellow travelers can congregate. No less important – and it reflects a deep human truth – is the fact that friendship often brings people together around a table, to enjoy together good food and drink that uplifts one’s spirit. Often in these long conversations we experience an anticipation of heaven: “it suddenly seems clear to us: yes, this is what true ‘life’ is – this is what it should be like.”⁵⁶

But true friendship is not satisfied only with the exchange between those who form a group of friends. It also asks for moments of solitude, of a certain intimacy, where one can speak “heart to heart.” Good friends understand this need and seek space for it without envy or jealousy. Thus the propitious context is created for “discreet indiscretions,”⁵⁷ for mutual advice, for speaking in confidence. God also makes use of these moments to draw closer to souls and “open up unexpected horizons”⁵⁸ for their zeal, including sharing in a divine mission in the world.

Friendship in a hectic world

It is also good to consider, with realism, some features of our contemporary culture that can pose a challenge to friendship. First of all, we need to realize that these obstacles are not insurmountable,

since we can always rely on the strength of God's grace. And where friendship is less frequent and strong, it is even more needed and more intensely sought by the hearts of men and women. Paraphrasing St John of the Cross, we could say: "Where there is no friendship, put friendship, and you will find friendship."

For example, the excessively competitive tone of some professional environments can lead to a distrustful and self-centred mentality, even if clothed in external good manners. It might seem as though working in any other way will result in others taking advantage of us. Certainly, we can't be naïve, but such an environment needs to be purified from within, by showing people the possibility of a different approach to life. One doesn't have to pressure, shout at, cheat or take advantage of others to achieve one's goals at work. A Christian always keeps in mind that work is service. Hence he or she aspires to be a boss, a colleague, a client or a teacher with whom people can become a good friend, without failing to respect the ethical norms of each profession.

We can also help foster an environment conducive to friendship by not spreading an atmosphere of excessive stress, activism or dispersion. In our hectic world today, it is sometimes difficult to achieve the serenity needed to make new friends; also, even when resting, the daily hustle and bustle can often lead to paths of "disconnection." But this is an opportunity, with humility and awareness of our own fragility, to offer others the attractive example of a person who "reads the life of Jesus Christ"⁵⁹ : a person who doesn't rush around, who smiles, who enjoys the present moment, who has a contemplative outlook, who rests with simple things, who has the creativity to make alternative plans, etc.⁶⁰

Trusting in what unites us

As St Josemaría recommended, maintaining "a positive and open attitude towards the current changes in society and in ways of living"⁶¹ facilitates friendship with many people, even when there is a generation gap. We need a deep love for the freedom of others, rejecting a rigid attitude when something admits of being viewed in many ways. "Certain ways of expressing oneself," the Prelate of Opus Dei tells us,

“can disturb or hinder the creation of an environment of friendship. For example, being overly emphatic in expressing one’s own opinion, or giving the impression that we think our own viewpoints are the definitive ones, or not taking an active interest in what the others say, are ways of acting that enclose a person in himself.”⁶²

In many places, a vision of life has spread that is inimical to basic principles of the moral law. This could sometimes even lead a person to deny the possibility of a benevolent love: desiring the good of the other person for him or herself. Perhaps this person finds in human relationships only a calculation of utility or superficial feelings of sympathy. This, of course, can become a source of misunderstanding and even conflict.

In this situation, it is important not to confuse the dialogue in friendship with a philosophical, legal or political argument. Dialogue between friends doesn’t come down to trying to convince the other person of our own ideas, even when these ideas are true according to classical philosophy or the Church’s magisterium. This doesn’t mean “not calling things by their name” or losing the ability to discern good from evil. What it means is that our arguments have value within a dialogue only when we share some common principle or authority with the other person.⁶³ Although friendship can also lead to a personal conversion, it is usually better to seek points of agreement rather than emphasize what separates us from a friend; we need to offer our own experience, without elaborate intellectual arguments, with all the strength of someone who shares with another person their own worries, sorrows and joys. And it is always important to listen since friendship, as St Josemaría said, more than in giving consists in understanding.⁶⁴

It may be helpful to keep in mind that most people, most of the time, are motivated by the deepest desires of the human heart: to love and to be loved. This strong desire for unity and a fulfilled and meaningful life, even though it can be dulled for a long time for many different reasons, always manifests itself again. A good friend – although not always finding the hoped-for response – knows how to wait. We need to wait

patiently until our friends, possibly because of a crisis in their own life, open their heart to the light they have sensed in our affection.

An image of God's patience

St Paul, in his famous hymn in praise of charity in his letter to the Corinthians, insists that "*charity is patient*" (1 Cor 12:4). As the Prelate of Opus Dei reminds us, "the birth of a friendship comes like an unexpected gift, and for that very reason it also requires patience. Sometimes certain bad experiences or prejudices can mean that it takes time before the personal relationship we have with someone close at hand turns into friendship."⁶⁵

St Josemaría always encouraged us to go "at God's pace." In his own life we see his undeniable apostolic daring, the courage – also human – with which he went out to meet people, even when they were far away, sometimes putting his own life in danger. For example, his conversation with Pascual Galbe, a judge who was a good friend of his, whom he knew from his university days. Amid the intense religious persecution, as a priest he risked many dangers by going to see him in Barcelona with the sole intention of spending time with his friend. In a previous conversation, while walking along the streets of Madrid, Galbe had asked him: "What do you want from me, Josemaría?" The founder of Opus Dei replied: "I love you. I don't need anything. I just want you to be a good and just man." And he repeated this to him in Barcelona when he went to visit him during those difficult times in Spain, while also leading him towards the truth.⁶⁶

The founder of Opus Dei saw patience as the virtue "that moves us to be understanding with others, for we are convinced that souls, like good wine, improve with time."⁶⁷ We should try to have the same patience with others that God has with us. As Pope Benedict XVI said: "The world is redeemed by the patience of God. It is destroyed by the impatience of man."⁶⁸ Being patient doesn't mean that we don't suffer sometimes because of the lack of response on the part of others to our affection, or because we see friends take a path that imperils their desire for happiness. But we need to suffer with the heart of Jesus,

identifying ourselves ever more fully with Christ's sentiments, and never give in to sadness or hopelessness.

The experience of a friend's forgiveness is a cause for hope in the darkest moments of life. The certainty that a friend awaits us, despite our mistakes, is for us a living image of God: the first Friend who waits for us to return to his arms of a Father and who always forgives us.

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Notes

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[←2]

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[←3]

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[←18]
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[←63]

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