



Theology Corner

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Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“What Does it Mean to be in a Holy Friendship?”

In the last Theology Corner, we discussed friendship from the aspect of the relationship between God and man. This week, I wanted to finish up the topic of friendship by discussing it from the aspect of a relationship between human beings. Human friendship is an essential component of living our lives toward perfection. This has been understood by pagan philosophers such as Aristotle who saw friendship as a great blessing in a person’s life. This is, in part, due to the fact that humans are social beings and frequently need help and encouragement, as friends strive together to lead a life of virtue and to love each other for the other’s sake. This is also consistent with the Christian view. I have found that St. Teresa of Avila’s concept of friendship is very helpful to see just what a holy friendship should look like – one that is based on a love informed by and reflective of a love for God.

Throughout her various works, she often spoke of three primary traits of a holy friendship. By holy friendship, we mean here a friendship which has its character flowing from the theological virtue of *charity*. The **first trait** of this type of friendship is that the friend experiences a longing for the other friend to be immersed in God. This will ensure that the closeness between both parties is not based on a *need* satisfaction. This is to be compared with a destructive friendship which may or may not carry with it any hostility or conflict, but still be one which fades after a short time if their personal interests change or if they move farther away from each other. If one has a relationship based on a longing for the other’s salvation, changes in circumstance should not affect the mutual love but instead should increase as their love for God increases.

A **second trait** of a holy friendship is that both parties correct each other when necessary. This loving admonition naturally flows from the first trait since a longing for their immersion in God makes it such that friends hate anything that would destroy their relationship with the Lord and with their well-being in general. This is why scripture makes the point very clear that “whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid.” (Prov. 12:1). This can be distinguished from a relationship that quickly sours when one person calls out the other’s faults. As long as the admonishment is truly a result of charity, it should be taken as an extension of the admonishment of Christ when we sin. If a relationship is destroyed because of this, it will thus be evident that the friendship was not one sought for the good of the other and also one that is not understood as being meant to lead us to heaven.

A **third trait** is that the friendship is rooted in deep permanent qualities, as opposed to things like outer beauty or other natural qualities. This goes along with the idea that friendships cannot be self-seeking and that they are meant to lead us to greater perfection. This can be distinguished from a harmful relationship where one or both parties are primarily attracted to superficial qualities such as external beauty or the enjoyment of getting together for gossip, idle discussions, etc. This latter part (i.e. idle discussions) may seem to be excessive to some, but this does not mean that friends cannot gather together for leisurely activities. Instead, it means that it is *destructive* to engage in activities that are not conducive to the spiritual perfection of the other. With regard to being attracted to more external factors, this is obviously destructive for a friendship since illness and aging can affect this attractiveness. The beauty that a friend sees in the other should be the beauty that is a result of traces of the divine within their soul. It is for this very reason that holy relationships strengthen as their love for God increases.

Essentially, all the traits of a holy friendship entail selflessness and true love based on virtue and the need to be instrumental in the sanctification of that person. Meanwhile, harmful friendships entail an egocentrism which presents a major defect in the friendship since it lacks charity and either seeks after utility, sensuality, and the like. The best way to avoid falling into a destructive friendship is to take into account the traits that are essential to a spiritual friendship. A true friendship is not sought for personal benefit, although personal benefits will naturally flow upon a good friendship since it will enable one to seek advice and counsel when dealing with difficult issues. It will enable one to be loved despite any faults, and even cared about enough to help the friend to improve upon them. Last but not least, it enables one to have a friend who will comfort them in times of sorrow. Let us all strive, with the help of God’s grace, to be friends following this model. Doing so will ensure that all of our friendships are both lasting and joyous as we grow in holiness together with our friends and draw from them a deeper possession of God.