

## Friendship and Holiness: Some basic ingredients

by Msgr. Peter Magee

### Introduction: the roots of the question

Everyone has their own history, their own story. What gives that story meaning, more than all else, for better or for worse, are relationships. This fact is not by chance, as if the "all else" of life might somehow be more meaningful. Indeed, relationships are not so much a bare *fact* as they are a fundamental *truth* of human existence, and that truth images the Truth of divine existence. Facts belong to the realm of happenstance and circumstance, the realm of the visible and the ephemeral; truth belongs to the realm of meaning and values, the realm of the invisible and the lasting. No one dies for the sake of a fact; many have died for values. Facts are often measurable by statistics; values defy such scientific scrutiny. A fact states what does take place; a value both promises what can take place and demands what must take place. The human person passes through the stream of facts around and within him, sometimes, to be sure, only with great suffering; but genuine values proceed from, and reach to, the very roots of being itself and, with the urgency of the true and the good, draw us both inward to true self-knowledge and outward in search of knowledge of the ultimate truth. Since nothing in creation compares with the value of the human person himself, it is as natural as it is necessary that the human person is to be reached most deeply by other human persons. It is thus *to* other human persons that the truth, the value and the meaning of oneself reach out to attain communion, to find fulfillment, to vanquish the living death of loneliness. And it is thus *by* other human persons that one is known, affirmed and loved for who one really is. That is the real meaning of history, personal and interpersonal.

But this process I am describing, however absorbing it may be among human beings, is still only of itself an image, understood as a limited participation in something much greater. The only reason that human relationships are this way is because they imitate the relationships between the Divine Persons of the Blessed Trinity. We can at times be inclined to think of God as a formula, as a monolithic "dogma", as devoid of character and identity, as a kind of impersonal authority, such as "the cosmos", "the Government" or, mistakenly, even "the Church." But God is a living, palpitating communion of Three Divine Persons. Our minds would never have known this had God Himself not revealed it to us. Even although it has been revealed, our minds can scarcely begin to grasp its meaning. What we can say, however, is that whatever is true, good and beautiful in our human relationships –and there is much- is a true, good and beautiful image of the relationships of the Divine Persons. What we can further say is that nothing of the darkness which overshadows, distorts and destroys our human relationships is present in God. Here we touch upon the holiness of God, the very being of God. For God is not holy just because there is no darkness in Him, but because there is only light in Him! He is transparent, He reveals Himself to a degree which may blind *us*, yet constitutes the openness and fullness of the relationships between those Three Persons themselves. His holiness is at one and the same time His omnipotent power and life, shown forth in creation and fully revealed in redemption, yet which goes mysteriously and infinitely beyond our greatest ability to touch Him with mind or heart. He alone is the Holy One, both fascinating and to be feared, as Rudolf Otto puts it.

*For us* there may seem to arise from all of this the question of the psalmist: "what is man that God should keep him in mind?" (cf. Ps.8,4). Coined differently: Why does He bother about us when, had we been He, we would have been, or so we think, contented just to be God? But *for God*, it is no mystery or puzzle that He would create mankind, seek us out and, as the penalty for making us free, pay the ultimate price to save us from sin and death. The good always, of its own gratuitous accord, will give of itself, indeed *give itself* for no other reason than it is good. The infinite Good gives itself infinitely. It is both astonishing and comforting to realize the profundity of God's desire to be with man. It is recounted very simply in chapter 3 of the book of Genesis where God is depicted as looking for the company of man and woman as He walks in the evening breeze of the Garden of Eden (cf. Gen. 3,8). If it is difficult enough to fathom what it means for God to be a palpitating communion of Persons, or for human beings to find fulfillment in reaching out to one another, it is breathtaking to realize that God would want to be with us, would plant in

us the desire for Himself, to the point that even the fulfillment we might find in one another can itself only be complete when we find one another in God and God in one another.

## **Friends in and with God**

What does all this have to do with friendship and holiness?

Put very simply: holy friendships are only possible in God, for God alone is holy and God alone is the source of friendship. This truth is already present, at least implicitly, in the goals and purposes of Courage. You find it if you combine the second and the fourth of those goals, i.e. the dedication of your entire life to Christ and the possibility and necessity of chaste friendships in the Christian life. Dedication to Christ is another way of speaking of sanctification, in which grace and freedom conspire and collaborate to draw all the dimensions of who one is to the Risen and Ascended Body of the Lord. Friendship, when it is true, will necessarily be holy, because the primordial Friend, the model Friend, the normative Friend of every human being is God, the Holy, the Immortal, the Strong. Chastity means integrity and there is no greater integrity than the Oneness of the Trinity. That Oneness is not just *possible*: it is actually the ground of *necessity* itself!

To develop holy friendships, then, with greater awareness and greater success, we need to understand, reflect and pray ever more deeply on the principles I just tried to outline. Like so many other words, friendship and holiness have drifted far from their original meaning, and certainly from their Christian meaning. Friendship has come to mean, for example, the simple fact of being associated with someone, being "buddies" for this or that occasion or activity; it can be used to dissimulate mutual selfishness or convenience or even profit. Obviously, friendship does not have the same depth of meaning for every acquaintance one has in life. To say one has "many friends" is perhaps not as accurate an expression as the term "friend" really deserves. Likewise, the word "holiness" has often been caricatured, from referring to the self-important vanity of the hypocrite to idealistic notions of one or other person for whom one simply feels affection or with whom one is actually infatuated. True holiness and true friendship are not drugs we take to escape from reality. They are constitutive of reality itself.

In referring to God, and in particular to Jesus, as "friend", we might run the risk of reducing Him to our fantasizing categories, as was the temptation of both Judas and Peter. We might even run the risk of inventing a self-serving notion of holiness, as was the pitfall of some of the leading Jews at the time of Jesus. Instead, it is God who seeks to "seduce" us (cf. Jer 20,7) to His way of being friend, as it is God, "the fountain of all holiness" (Eucharistic Prayer II) who seeks to immerse us in the magnificence of His own being. To be drawn into the friendship of God is to be drawn into His holiness, into the intimacy and fullness of His very own life; to be drawn into His holiness is to be drawn into His friendship. That is the ground, the context, the atmosphere of all our other friendships. Indeed, extreme though it may sound, it is doubtful if a friendship really is such if it is not marked to some degree by the holiness of God, or at least is compatible with His will. That does not mean at all that friends must spend all day in prayer; it does mean, however, that their relationship will be seasoned with the awareness of God with, in and through one another.

## **Friends in and with Christ: the Creed**

From within the Christian reality, how then might one articulate a more specific, spiritual vision of holy friendship which can be the solid rock at the basis of our different relationships?

Perhaps one can begin by asking a question: if faith and the sacraments constitute the norm of truth and holiness in Christian life, where can I find friendship in the Creed, and the "genetic code" of it in my sacramental identity? Keep in mind that we want to focus on friendship both with God and with one another.

In the Creed there are two phrases which might help us. The first one is the little, almost negligible, phrase "for us", "pro nobis" (as in "for us men and for our salvation"). That "for us" is the why of creation and the why of redemption; it is for our sake that Jesus did all He did. What is more, He *did* all that "for

us" because He has chosen *to be* "for us". "To be for" precedes "to do for." In pure freedom, God in Jesus established us in His friendship, even although we had broken faith with Him. Proof of His faithful love is that while He had lost our friendship, we did not lose His. He died to prove it. He revealed His friendship in revealing His own holiness to us and for us in the two-step process of destruction and restoration. "Dying He destroyed our death; rising He restored our life" (Memorial Acclamation). While God's holiness cannot tolerate our sins, God's friendship for us cannot tolerate losing us. Faced, then, with the dilemma of being true to Himself and true to us, He did what He had to do to save both: He was born, suffered, died, rose and ascended that He might justify, save, sanctify and glorify us. The Creed hinges on that little phrase, "for us"; the Creed is the greatest story of friendship ever told; the Creed is the greatest story of holiness ever told. The Creed, that apparently tedious and lengthy recitation of formulae we recite every Sunday and holy day, is the handbook of holy friendship.

However, there is a second phrase, and it depends on the "for us". We might approach it by asking a fair question: if God *is* for us and *does* for us, who and what, then, are we to be and to do "for Him"? It is friendship after all! At some abstract level of God's perfection, I suppose we must answer that we are "no-one and "nothing", but in reality that is not the full response. Jesus clearly wants someone and something from us, but He wants it to be and to be given freely; He wants from us a willing and a total "yes" to Himself, and then all that He has provided for us to bring that yes to completion, will be effective. Is that not the story of Our Lady's "fiat": a free and total yes, then everything was made possible for Her? The combined fruit of His "for us" and our yes to it is found in the phrase "communion of saints", as recited in the last part of the Creed, "I believe in the holy, Catholic Church, the communion of saints, etc.". That phrase has a long history and can mean at least three different things, all linked to one another: it basically means that communion which is the very life of the holy God (God is a Oneness of three "Saints", in this sense); it can mean participation in the "holy things" God gives to us, viz. the sacraments; and it can mean the holy friendship in God of all those who have said and acted their yes to God, who have "done His will throughout the ages", and have become "holy as He is holy." At the beginning I spoke a little of the inner life of God; a little later, I will speak of participation in the "holy things"; for now, let me speak of the communion of saints understood as the network of holy friendships.

You cannot exclude people from your heart and life and be, at the same time, holy. Lonely holiness is at least suspect. The work of sanctification wrought by God's grace is precisely to bring each person individually, and all persons together, into the common unity of the family of God, where everyone is a "first-born son or daughter." An authentic yes to God opens one's heart to all humanity, but the authenticity of that yes is proven in concrete love for the one actually at your side. If hell is other people, as Sartre claims, then God is in hell, and we should all want to get there! Sanctification is therefore about falling in love with God; but, in the end, you cannot do that without loving all those who are in love with God. Our yes to Jesus draws us inexorably out of ourselves and into His sentiments, mind and heart about created reality itself, especially in its apex, the human person. That yes demands the toil and sweat of saying no to what keeps us imprisoned in shame, like Adam and Eve skulking in the bushes, and it draws us gradually back to experience the breeze of that primordial evening, walking with God and with all others who walk with Him.

Sainthood, of course, is another term at which we can feel our hearts sink. We imagine saints had no sins or temptations, and so that excludes us. We think of canonization and, again, we feel that excludes us. Neither of these reactions is correct. The earliest meaning of sainthood or saintliness is linked to the simple fact of being baptized: in the New Testament, the saints were those who had received that sacrament and had thus become members of God's holy people, God's saints, precisely. With time, a moral sense of saintliness was also understood because baptism, as a new life, thus makes possible and demands a new life-style or behavior. However, think of St. Peter, St. Mary Magdalene, St. Augustine, St. Francis of Assisi! These were not people who never sinned or were never tempted; they were sinners who trusted so much in the friendship of Jesus that they eventually realized that, without Him, life, meaning and joy were at best counterfeit. Why take pleasure in a leaky cistern when you have before you the fountain of living water (cf. Jer. 2,13)? Holiness is certainly a point of *arrival* when grace and freedom eventually conquer sin in one's life; it is also a point of *departure*, since the grace of baptism cleanses us once and for all from original sin, as well as from any personal sins we may have when we are baptized; but holiness is also a *path* in between the beginning and the end. Holiness is a methodology, a courageous strategy, struggle and even "agony" to sustain daily the yes to Jesus and the no to deception (think of the formula of the baptismal promises of "renunciation of evil"). Such is the meaning of conversion, of true

charity, of the way of the Cross. It is certainly primarily a personal struggle, but it is also inter-personal and social, indeed it is also the struggle of the community of the saints, understood as the Church of the baptized, at the same time sinful and holy. The communion of saints is not populated only by the great saints set up by the Church for our inspiration and imitation. It is filled with the countless individuals who, like you and I, have "crept" their way to the throne of grace. In this life, holiness may not be perfect, but it is perfectly feasible for us if we keep the courage to respond to the friendship of Jesus. And who more effective to draw us into that friendship than the saints whom Jesus Himself gives us as our friends? Never forget that the saints are with you and for you. Remember the image of the Letter to the Hebrews (12,1) where the crowd of saints is clapping, shouting, cheering, and we are the ones running for the prize. They are with us, they know what is happening to us: we must never forget that!

### **Friends in and with Christ: the Sacraments**

It is by communion in "holy things" that we can best equip ourselves to be courageous in holiness and in friendship. The Word and the Sacraments are the tools Jesus gives us. They plant the coordinates of our method in holiness; they thus also constitute the structure, or the infrastructure, of our holy friendships, of our communion of saints.

But since, after the Ascension, the Word takes flesh in the sacraments, let me here just take the four sacraments we have probably all received and try and show how they underpin and energize our friendship with Jesus and make holy friendship possible with one another.

First, a word about sacraments. The visibility of Jesus in His human flesh has passed into the sacraments of His Church. Every sacrament makes effectively present some grace won for us by Christ during His "days in the flesh." A sacrament has a rite and proper signs; but the reality of the sacrament is a work of love and holiness by the Blessed Trinity, achieved through the humanity of Jesus, present in His Church, to confer salvation and sanctification upon us. One might say: the sacraments are the efficacious signs, par excellence, of the committed and holy friendship of God for his saints. Note further that the salvation and sanctification in question are not just intended for our souls, but also for our bodies. The spiritual does not exclude the corporal, and while the body must die, it is destined to rise again. Jesus took flesh so that ultimately all flesh, through the freedom of our spirits, might share in his eternal life in the flesh. He is still in the flesh, the risen flesh! Is this not also the message of the Assumption? God is not just friends with our souls, He does not just love the heart, as if the heart had some disembodied, independent existence of its own. He loves the whole human person, body and soul, although He can clearly not love the presence of sin in any dimension of the human being. Let us not think that all sins are in the flesh, as if separate from the soul. The worst sins are in the spirit of man. In a certain sense, there is no sin in the flesh as such, because of itself the flesh cannot sin. It is the spirit which may make the flesh sin. We need to be careful not to curse the flesh and bless the spirit. The whole reality of flesh and spirit must be taken together. In Catholic Tradition, the body is not just some vehicle to be discarded once the soul achieves perfection. The body is rather the manifestation of the soul, the "sacrament of the real presence of the soul", as someone once put it; the human person does not have a body, so much as he is his body. The body is not an appendix to the soul; it is not some insignificant and unfortunate, "collateral effect." The body participates fully in the dignity of the person; Christ and his Spirit dwell in the body because they dwell in the person. Full, real presence to one another necessitates, at least to some degree, the body, for the body is the place, the "HQ", from which we are able to relate to one another. Even a distant e-mail needs a finger to click the mouse! To be present in spirit is good, but to be present in the body, or "in person", as we interestingly say, is much better.

A fully initiated Catholic has received baptism, confirmation and Eucharist. These are three ways in which Christ is truly present to *us*, we are truly present to Him and we are truly present to *one another*.

In baptism we become real members of His Body: He truly, yet sacramentally, makes us participate in His death and Resurrection in the flesh. But since we truly, and not just metaphorically, become one in Him, we thus truly become, through Him, members of one another: we enter the Church, not by way of a club membership, but as living cells of the living Body of the living Lord.

Confirmation effects the outpouring of the Spirit of Jesus upon us, an outpouring which, however, can only take place because we are already within the Body of Jesus. The Spirit blows where He wills, but only through the Body of Jesus by baptism; and He blows us to witness to our communion with Jesus and with one another. There is no "life of the Spirit" in opposition to the "life of Jesus": without losing their individual identity, their life is one. The Spirit is the "breeze" of our walking with God. It is by our love for Jesus, for one another and for all, which convinces the world who Jesus is and who the Church is. The Spirit is the bond of unity in *God*, the bond of *our* unity in Jesus and, ultimately, the bond of unity *in humanity itself*. He enables and inspires us to make other bonds within the "great bond", including the bond of friendship, like inter-connecting cells of His Body. He makes us to be "enmeshed" with one another. It is not the United Nations which will unite the human race: only the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ will do that.

It is above all in the Eucharist, however, that Jesus is truly present to us. The Eucharist is the source and summit of the life of the Church; it perfects the different stages and types of union already given to us in baptism and confirmation. The real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist consolidates, deepens and matures the reality of our presence to Jesus, and thus of our presence to one another. When we partake *worthily* of the Eucharist, we partake necessarily of one another. There is no deeper bond possible between human beings and God, or between human beings and one another. This is not just a "juridical" obedience (obeying the Sunday Mass precept), but what can be called an "ontological" obedience: it is only something we must do (juridical and moral) because it is something we already are (ontological).

But, as we know all too well, it is alas too easy for us to weaken or even break our bonds with Jesus, with the Church and with one another. To reverse the damage we can do, and to prevent it from happening further, we have been given a fourth sacrament, the sacrament of reconciliation. This sacrament restores us to the innocence of our baptism and unleashes once more for us the purifying and healing waters of grace; it also restores the grace of confirmation in "allowing" full freedom to the Spirit of God in us to bind us to Jesus, to one another, and to blow us to witness with renewed creativity to the power of true love, or charity; it readies us once more to surrender our whole selves, body and soul, to the Eucharist and to direct our spiritual and corporal presence and service to one another.

These four sacraments, then, are not simply holy things we have done or we do. They define who we are, for Christ is our real life, our real love, our real friend, our real destiny. Christ is in the flesh that He might be in our flesh, and ours in Him. The sacraments are the signs and instruments of holy friendship. Our radical solitude before God is not the ultimate truth of who we are. That solitude is the reflection of the uniqueness of our individual identity before God, but it is a uniqueness destined to flower in communion with the whole human race, in the communion of saints. Solitude is not the stone over our tomb, but the doorway to communion, a doorway shaped by the Cross, an exit and an entrance into the universal Body of Jesus Christ. The converse side of our solitude, our uniqueness, is that we shall be fully like Jesus, the only Son of God (not the lonely Son of God), the first-born sons and daughters of God and citizens of the New Jerusalem.

### **Conclusion: chaste and holy friendships**

Let me draw on some of what has thus far been said so as to bring to a conclusion these reflections.

Friendship is only possible in a sincere openness to give and receive a love which is true to Jesus in both its spiritual motivation and in its corporal expression. Friendship implies real presence, at least for a time, in both body and soul, and therefore integral respect for the unity of body and soul of the friend. Friendship will require self-revelation, and thus trust and vulnerability. It proceeds from the deepest truth of the human person and aims for that same truth in the friend. It will require faithfulness, sustained by a readiness to forgive without conditions. Friendship cannot be one-sided, although love can be, in the hope that it will be requited. Friendship which tends to greater depths can reach the point of becoming a covenant, sealed in the spirit, not in the flesh, unless we speak of a man and a woman whose friendship has first blossomed in the marriage covenant. But remember: the covenant of marriage will end with death; friendship will last forever. No greater love can someone have than to lay down his life for a friend: so friendship is not a convenience, but involves commitment and self-sacrifice, suffering and renunciation, perhaps of the ultimate kind. Friendship needs to be realistic, that is, grounded in truth and humility, not

in fantasy or thinly-veiled selfishness. A friend is not a means to an end, but an end in himself; a friend is not there to be the object of my infantile or neurotic desires, but to be treasured like the "pearl of great price" or the "treasure hidden in a field." Friendship may be possible without prayer, but it is true prayer which gives it its rootedness in Jesus. Saying the other's name in prayer awakens, so to speak, the consciousness of Jesus about that other and leads one to know and love them as does Jesus Himself.

Finally, and perhaps indeed firstly, all of the above can be applied to friendship with yourself. For, if friendship is a form of love, then authentic love of self means friendship with self. Just as friendship implies unconditional acceptance, so it means befriending our own moral shadows, the ocean of our unconscious conflicts as well as the stars and galaxies of our ideals. Friendship with others cannot be a way of avoiding the real encounter with oneself or with God. In the end, friendship will be the shape of our eternal communion with all the saints, with the Triune God and with the whole of creation. Eternal friendship will replace the sacraments themselves, for the goal of the sacraments is the eternal communion of all men and women in God. When that is achieved by God, then the sacraments will be no more. Then we shall walk once more, without shame, without fear, in full transparency and with everlasting exultation in the evening breeze of the garden of God.