

THE TRANSFORMATION OF FRIENDSHIP

Intimacy cannot be measured by the degree of attraction to the other, nor even by the obligation of remaining together for a lifetime, nor even by the sharing of burdens and responsibilities, but *by the deep mutual understanding of persons and by the totality of their belonging to one another through reciprocal acceptance and self-surrender*. This is the core and the height of every relationship, whatever its character, and it is also what we understand by the essence of friendship. This understanding has come, further, from the words of Christ himself. At the very climax of his life, at the Last Supper where he gave his Body and Blood to his apostles and allowed them to witness and share in his most intimate prayer to the Father, he spoke to them of friendship.

Here it seems to us that Jesus is unveiling the deepest heart of authentic love and relationship, and he uses the word friendship to describe it. What characterizes this kind of relationship? Jesus indicates that it is 1) complete self-disclosure, 2) acceptance by each person of such disclosure, and 3) the abiding of persons with and in one another.

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love.” This is a summary of what follows, and, in context, it is rooted deeply in Jesus’ words in the previous chapters (John 13-15 are a kind of “charter of obedience”). Jesus has recently spoken of the way that receiving him and his word, and obeying this word, opens up a space in our hearts for the Trinity to come and dwell, for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to “make their home” within us.

Now, at the climax of this movement, Jesus unveils before his disciples the deepest meaning and mystery of obedience, which is a profound blossoming of intimacy with God and of the acceptance of his love. “As the Father has loved me.” This is the source of Jesus’ whole existence: the love of his Father, his intimacy with the Father. And his acceptance of the Father’s love is so absolute and total that the Father lives in the Son, and the Son lives in the Father. Indeed, “the Father who dwells in me does his works” (Jn 14:10). The Father is free to live and to act in his beloved Son, to make his home within him; and therefore, in seeing the Son, we also “see the Father” (Jn 10:9). We are invited to share in this same intimacy, this same sharing of life, and this same transparency to the love and the beauty of the Father. This is what Jesus means that “he who abides in me, and in him, he it is that bears much fruit” (Jn 15:5). What is this fruit, above all, but love, the love that is Jesus’ new commandment: to love as we have been loved by him (cf. Jn 13:34-35; 15:12, 17)? Yes, the fruit that God seeks in us is love, a love that springs forth from our very intimacy with him, and in turn safeguards and deepens this intimacy. This is the glory of obedience, the fruit of virginal union with Christ, and the beautiful blossom of the poverty of surrender: that the beauty of God flowers in our lives from the heart of our abiding intimacy with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love” (Jn 15:9). Jesus has drawn us into intimate relationship with himself just as he is eternally in relationship with the Father—and he has done this out of pure love, out of the vulnerable opening of his Heart and his life to us as his friends. “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.” Loving us just as he has been loved by his Father, he takes us up into the realm of his love—into the realm of his own inner solitude—and desires us to “abide” here, which means both to *dwell* and to *remain*. It is to make our home in him who desires to make his home in us. In a word, Jesus has opened up to us in *nakedness* his own inmost *solitude*, sharing it with us without reserve so that we may enter into intimate *communion* with him. And this allows us “to abide in him, and he in us” (cf. Jn 15:4; 17:21). Here we can discern clearly the contours of authentic love as we have described them: *complete openness in the mutual acceptance and self-surrender of persons, blossoming in their intimate union*. And we can describe this union as a profound and complete “interpenetration of solitudes,” in which persons truly abide in each other, welcomed so completely that they can make their home in the hearts of one another.

Because Christ is God, the Son who is eternally in the bosom of the Father, this entrance into communion with him immediately allows us to abide in the bosom of the Father. Further, just as the Son is eternally obedient to his Father—with an obedience, as we have said, which is but the blossoming of his belovedness and his acceptance of the Father’s gift—the same is true with us in relation to the Son. The Son abides always in the realm of the Father’s love through his complete acceptance of all that comes from the Father and through his complete reciprocal surrender. If we are to remain in the Son, we too remain through this same attitude, through accepting him unreservedly and totally, and entrusting our entire life to him who loves us and has taken us into himself. This allows him to live and perpetuate his life, his life of love, within us, and to take us, in turn, to share in the life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And this intimacy brings us joy: “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

Jesus affirms for us this inmost heart of relationship in what follows, and confirms the mystery that he has been revealing in all the words that lead up to this point. He first unveils the depths of his love—which is not limited by anything, but is absolute, unconditional, and total. Indeed, it is a love that, from its fullness, gives itself entirely for our good, our happiness, and our salvation: “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” The word friends almost seems to come out of nowhere, but Jesus emphasizes especially this. “You are my friends...” And what makes us friends? “All that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.” We cannot be called servants any longer, for we do not stand on the “outside” and simply receive external commands. No, we have been taken up *into* the very Heart of the One who loves us, into the intimacy of his love, his desire, his plans, and his own eternal delight with the Father and the Spirit.

Yes, here Christ speaks of his complete self-disclosure: he has opened himself entirely to us, sharing with us even the most intimate truth of his belovedness before the Father, and all that, in this place, he receives from the Father. And this is precisely what he seeks in us who love him, what he seeks in loving us: to draw us into the innermost mystery of the Trinity—into the intimate union between the Father and the Son in their one Spirit—which has been opened up to us and given to us entirely, that we may share in it, letting ourselves be caught up in its midst.

The previous words which Christ spoke at the Last Supper reveal to us *a transfiguration and elevation of the mystery of friendship*. Friendship can no longer be seen merely, as some have said, as a kind of comradeship, a “pursuing-together” of noble goals, since now it is bathed in the light of the relationship between the Son and the Father in the heart of the Trinity. Our friendship with Jesus, and, within this, our friendship with one another, occurs within the realm of the Trinity’s own divine life. Every one of our human relationships has been elevated to a supernatural level, utterly irradiated and transformed by grace, and therefore takes its ultimate measure, model, and inspiration from this “divine friendship” of the Father and the Son, and of the Son with each one of us.

What this means above all is that, at the heart of our relationships, a new and unheard-of depth of intimacy has opened up. Within the Heart of Jesus, who has made us all his own, we are all profoundly and inseparably united with one another. From now on, every contact we have with one another—of whatever nature—occurs within and is influenced by this truth. Every time we encounter, it is in him, in the closeness, in the mutual acknowledgment, in the shared belonging of the “divine friendship” that lies at the foundation of our being and our experience. This means that I recognize you *in him* in a way deeper than I can know you outside of him. And only in him and through him will I know you and love you fully.

This divine friendship is therefore a radical revolution of our understanding of human relationships (and of our relationship with God)—the breaking into our world of the newness of redemption and of the fullness, present already now in seed, that awaits us at the end of time. Yes, the inner “virginal form” of love that will come to fullness in the new creation is already at work in our hearts and our lives through the

Spirit who has been given to us. This inner form is virginal because it has been deepened and expanded beyond the limitations of this earthly life, even while irradiating this life with its newness. It loves both with a deeper and more absolute exclusivity—founded in the exclusive love of God for each unrepeatably person—and with a freer and more expansive universality.

Such a new way of seeing and encountering others opens up profound possibilities for spiritual friendship. It paves the way, when persons encounter one another within the love of Christ, within their shared love for God and their pursuit of intimacy with him, to a friendship that surpasses the limitations of merely earthly friendship. This kind of intimacy, this degree of friendship, is clearly not possible with all persons in this life. It is a promise and a hope for what awaits us fully only in the new creation. There alone will we “know as we are known” (cf. 1 Cor 13:12), will we be able to share ourselves fully with all and receive fully the sharing of others. This will be possible because we shall all be immersed in the all-enveloping love of God who embraces every person within himself, binding us all together as one in his own knowledge and love. Nonetheless, the newness has already become present; it has already been buried as a seed of life in the midst of our world. Even if this closeness cannot be fostered with every person in this life—or even with only a few—this is a great privilege and a profound call that is entrusted to us who have heard Christ’s words: “I no longer call you servants, but I call you friends.”

The greatest gift, the apex and highest blossoming of the Christian and human life, is precisely this intimate friendship: *friendship with God and with other persons in God*. This is because authentic love, true charity seeks not merely to affirm the dignity of others, nor even merely to seek their welfare at a distance—but also to be intimately joined to them as one within the Goodness, Beauty, and Truth that binds us together. Even in loving an enemy, what I ultimately desire is that his heart is so softened and transformed that he may become a friend. The impulse of love, in every case, is toward complete reconciliation and intimacy with the cradling arms of God’s Love, this Love in which we shall be united completely with one another, and in which alone our restless hearts will be at rest.

Yes, friendship is indeed a privileged pathway, for ourselves and for those whom we love, into intimacy with God. The great gift and task entrusted to us in this life, therefore, is that of fostering intimate friendship. First of all, as we have seen, it is the gift and the invitation of *intimate friendship with Jesus Christ, and in him with the Father and the Spirit*. This is the foundational relationship of our life, from which and in which all other relationships can find their place and their full blossoming. But within this we have also, certainly, been created for *friendship with other human persons, with our brothers and sisters who have been entrusted to us freely within the love of God*. We are therefore invited to seek to establish such bonds of relationship, such mutual sharing, and such intimacy, as will anticipate the beauty of the new creation.

In this way, indeed, the intimacy of those who become truly one, bound together in friendship within the Heart of Christ, acts as a magnetic force in the midst of this fragmented world, drawing people back together from estrangement into greater unity...drawing humanity toward the fullness of reconciliation, the bliss of perfect intimacy that awaits us at the end of time.

Excerpts from “Cradled in the Arms of Love: Childlike Confidence as the Heart of Holiness”

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