

PRIESTLY FRATERNITIES: LIVING THE SACRAMENT OF THE OTHER

• Massimo Camisasca •

“If we do not see our brother as an obstacle, we cannot love him. It is at this point that we discover the meaning of the sacramental presence of the other; his otherness or diversity is a sign of a Presence that transcends the other and makes him a sign of something more. ”



One can speak of priestly fraternities or friendships in the Church from a juridical point of view.¹ This is an interesting approach, since law always reveals the history of man and sheds light on how he has understood himself and others. Nevertheless, I would like to approach this topic from a more profound point of view, examining priestly fraternities or friendships as the expression of something essential to the life of the Church, and, even more fundamentally, to man as such. Our theme thus becomes the experience of friendship (obviously, we can cover only a few aspects of this experience here).

This existential approach to the theme of friendship is better suited to my own experience as the founder and superior of a priestly fraternity, a fraternity that has helped me to discover how much this friendship was an answer to my deepest desires, and also

¹This essay reproduces a talk given in Rome to the school for priests of the Congregation for the Clergy, 30 January 2002.

to the promise that the encounter with Christ had represented for my life.

1. Friendship in antiquity

One gauge of the decisive importance of friendship in the life of man in every age is the fact that humanity's greatest writers and philosophers have frequently spoken of friendship, and have seen it as an essential key to understanding the human being as something which enters into the very definition of life itself.

Among the many examples, I will cite only Aristotle and Cicero. Aristotle, speaking of friendship in books eight and nine of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, maintains that "there is nothing more necessary to life, and without it none of the goods is good."² Cicero, in chapter six of his dialogue, *Lelius de amicitia*, writes, "I know not whether, apart from wisdom, there be anything better for man than friendship, the gift of the immortal gods to his life."³

Friendship is thus seen by these great figures of pre-Christian antiquity as a necessary good, a gift of God. It is also considered to be the source of happiness. In chapter 27 of *Lelius*, for example, Cicero says that if charity and benevolence—which, we shall see, are for him the characteristics of friendship—are eliminated from life, the possibility of joy is also eliminated.⁴

Friendship is thus an aspect of love. It is love's summit. It involves, first of all, a reciprocity that is not necessarily present in every love: one can love a thing, a good, and even a person, without this love necessarily being harmed by the absence of reciprocity. Friendship, on the other hand, is an active virtue that implies the response of the other: friendship implies a friend.

Even more, friendship implies that the friend is another self (both Aristotle⁵ and Cicero⁶ say this), who is loved as one loves oneself. With a friend, one lives a life of concord and communion. The goods of the present life and those hoped for in the life to come

²Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII, 1, 1155a.

³Cicero, *Lelius de amicitia*, VI, 20.

⁴Cf. Cicero, *Lelius de amicitia*, XXVII, 102.

⁵Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX, 4, 1166a.

⁶Cf. Cicero, *Lelius de amicitia*, XXI, 80.

all become an instrument for nourishing the harmony of this common life. Cicero defines friendship as “*consensio divinarum et humanum rerum*”—the convergence and common fruition of human and divine goods—lived “*cum benevolentia et caritate*.”⁷ The word “charity”—we note that with Cicero we are still outside a Christian context—bespeaks the gratuity that must be present in this convergence; the word “benevolence” bespeaks the desire that the sole measure of one’s relationship with the other be the good of the other. One seeks no advantages in friendship—as we see in book 27 of *Lelius*—except those which flower of themselves within the friendship: the joy that arises from a life lived in wisdom and love.⁸

Aristotle adds an important note: friendship is active and selective, that is, it is nurtured by a preference. It is an intensity of love that turns life among friends into a school for the charity we are called to have for all.⁹

2. *The novelty Christ brings into relationships*

At the highpoint of his life, Jesus, who had given ample testimony during his public life as to what friendship meant for him, chose some with whom he would have a closer relationship, and among the disciples he further chose that there be apostles, “that they might stay with him” (Mk 3:14), and to them he confided the whole mystery of his life. We see again the two characteristics of friendship already intuited by Cicero: community in human things and community in divine things. This community is the apostolic community, the highest example of friendship that history offers. It is Jesus himself who gives us the key to contemplating the experience he lived with his disciples: “I have called you friends, because I have told you all that the Father has told me” (cf. Jn 15:15).

Christ lived this friendship as the culmination of the charity to which he gave birth in his incarnation, death, and resurrection; in order to understand what this friendship really is, then, we must participate in his life. The friendship that he lived with his most intimate companions, the friendship that he has made possible

⁷Cf. Cicero, *Lelius de amicitia*, XXVII, 102.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII, 2, 1155b.

among human beings, is born today from his sacraments: from Baptism, Eucharist, and Penance. It is born also from his teaching. It manifests itself in his followers, in their recognition of the central place he asks to take in the lives of those who encounter him. Friendship with Christ is lived out as service to his person (Augustine rightly comments on the phrase from John cited above: “you call me friend, and I continue to consider myself your servant”).

Precisely for this reason, many Christian thinkers have written very profoundly of friendship. Their reflections clarify and fulfill the intuitions of the ancient philosophers through their own personal experience of friendship lived in a Christian context (often a monastery). Saint Thomas, for example, takes over many themes from both Cicero and Aristotle. For him, as for them, friendship is “*amor benevolentiae*,”¹⁰ the love that wills the good of the other, a love of community, of exchange, a love that consists in treating one’s friend as oneself. Friendship rests upon a community of life, goods, and virtues. As the summit of charity, friendship grants man the experience of the divine life. Is not the Trinity the highest and most unattainable example of friendship?

It is not by chance that Aelred of Rievaulx, another great medieval scholar of friendship (a category that includes Bernard), affirms in book two of his *De spirituali amicitia* that friendship is a step towards the love and the knowledge of God.¹¹

Along the same lines, the Eastern Fathers—and, beginning with them, a tradition that leads to the Orthodox theology of the last two centuries—saw in friendship the highest expression of the mystical union between God and man. Pavel Florenskij dedicates part of his work *The Pillar and Foundation of Truth* (letter eleven) to friendship, and notes, “The mystical unity of two is a condition of knowledge and the manifestation of the spirit of truth who grants this knowledge.”¹² Florenskij takes the teaching of Cicero and Aristotle, which Thomas also develops, to their furthest consequences. A friend is not only he who treats his friend as himself; friends constitute a bi-unity, a dyad. They are no longer merely what

¹⁰Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II, II, q. 25, a.4.

¹¹Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spirituali amicitia*, II, 18.

¹²Pavel Florenskij, *La colonna e il fondamento della verità* (Rusconi: Milan, 1974), 495.

they were when taken individually, but something more, one soul. In this unity, each of the friends receives a confirmation of his own personality, finding his own I in the I of the other.¹³

3. *Fraternity and priesthood*

The foregoing discussion of fraternity and friendship was intended, of course, to describe the essence of the Christian event, but it also had another goal: to point to an essential dimension of human experience itself. In other words, my intention was to describe both the fabric of being, and of the being that entered into history, God made man, the fabric of the event that he inaugurated. Now, what is true for every baptized person is true for every vocation rooted in Baptism—including the priesthood. Everything that is born from Baptism, in fact, participates in the particular structure that the sacrament gives to man's life—the structure of communion—and, at the same time, expresses it. The experience of every Christian vocation, therefore, is necessarily fed by the experience of fraternity. There is no Christian vocation to a relationship with God that is not an event of communion; there is no shortcut to God that bypasses Christ and his Body.

In particular, the word “fraternity,” since it describes the essence of the Christian event, cannot be disconnected from the essence of priestly life; on the contrary, it takes on an historical and existential urgency for the times in which we are called to live. The problem of our times is precisely the spasmodic search for a shortcut to God (since one cannot do without God)—a shortcut that sidesteps the bodiliness of Christ.

Today, no one can withstand the attacks stemming from this worldly mentality unless his affections are guided by a clear judgment of belonging. It is this judgment that not only makes possible, but also nourishes and makes attractive, the living out of virginity, poverty, and obedience that the priest (as every Christian, according to his state in life) is called to embrace. If I belong to my brothers, I no longer belong to myself; my time, the things that I have, my money, my gifts, my relationships, are no longer my own.

¹³Cf. *ibid.*, 499.

Discovering this in one's own existence is something infinitely greater and more joyful than belonging to or keeping oneself. Keeping myself makes me small; discovering that I belong to other faces who were called along with me, asserting to belong to the story of Christ in the world through those faces, makes me great. The greatness of my person is given by the history of Christ among the people to whom I wish to belong in response to his call.

I think that this point, which is both psychological and spiritual, captures the passage from nature to the new being to which Baptism calls each one of us.

But I want to develop these considerations even further. One can become an authentically Christian personality only by acknowledging the event of the fellowship into which Christ has inserted him and allowing himself to be generated by it. None of us can proceed toward the truth of his own being except through the change to which the presence of others impels us. The presence of the other changes our lives much more than the rains that over the ages furrow the earth and polish the rocks. The brother who is placed at my side plays the role of a sacrament.

In this sense I would go so far as to say that, if we do not see our brother as an obstacle, we cannot love him. Unless we are altogether spiritualistic or superficial, we cannot help noticing, at certain moments of our life, the weight of the other who is placed at our side (for instance, in the workplace), the weight of his perceptions, background, and different personal temperament. These differences can show up even in someone whom we otherwise consider to be extraordinarily close. It is at this point that we discover the meaning of the sacramental presence of the other; we understand that his otherness or diversity is the sign of a Presence that transcends the other and makes him a sign of something more.

Gilbert Cesbron once said, "every great existence is born of an encounter with a great chance."¹⁴ In the fellowship of Christ, this great chance is offered to us in the other who is placed at our side. It is the greatness of the One who reaches me through the other placed at my side. I note: not necessarily through the holiness of the other, but perhaps even through his poverty. The growth of the person is not a Herculean effort of the will; it is the fruit of the

¹⁴Gilbert Cesbron, *È mezzanotte dottor Schweitzer* (RCS Rizzoli Libri: Milan, 1993), 26.

continual provocation of a true fellowship. “*Sufficiencia nostra ex Deo*,” says Saint Paul (2 Cor 3:5). Others, when we desire, recognize, and welcome them as signs of His company, make us capable of becoming, in our turn, companions along the path of the people we meet.

4. Degenerations in living out this fellowship

As with all human things, the fellowship that is a sign of the mystery and the place of the presence of Christ can be lived in a reductive manner. When this happens, it means that our human criteria have prevailed over the novelty Christ has brought into human relationships. I want to outline schematically three forms of this degeneration.

A first possible degeneration is to see fellowship or friendship in Christ as a matter of duty. This would be a little like saying, “since we are together, since Someone put us together, we have the duty of living our lives in common.” The root of this degeneration is the misunderstanding of the true nature of charity, which is the event of the gratuity of Christ’s love for us and of our response to this love. A moralistically reduced friendship is short-lived and almost always ends in violence. Christian fellowship, on the other hand, does not generate itself; it is not born mostly of the fruit of ascetic effort. It is first a gift, a grace; it lives on as a memory of this grace.

A second degenerate expression of fellowship in Christ is a community conceived and lived out as a kind of strategy: there is “strength in numbers,” as we hear in an oft-cited proverb. Fellowship becomes a strategy in order to understand better, and to act more efficaciously (even in mission). This can be a subtle and dangerous temptation precisely because it plays upon sentiments of generosity and commitment that seem to be aspects of our love for Christ. The “illness” of this position lies once again in the fact that it bases everything on trust in ourselves and our own “doing.”

A third and final degeneration is to conceive of friendship or fellowship as a sort of shelter: as a comfortable place, an escape from the world. The error here lies in considering the fellowship to be something nice, something that makes us happy, but in a naturalistic sense that distracts us from the mission that Christ entrusts to us in and with it. A fellowship understood in this sense becomes an agglomeration of solitudes, where in the end we seek in the other

merely acquiescence to what we “feel” or “like.” The meaning of a real Christian fraternity is just the opposite: that God does not leave man alone in the trial of existence. Solitude—that would be diabolical. Fellowship makes drama possible because it overcomes the tragedy of man alone in the face of evil. This tragedy has been conquered, because Someone conquered it for us. Christ called the twelve not only to be with him, but “to send them” (Mk 3:14) to announce his victory.—*Translated by Michelle Borrás.* □

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