



STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

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Spiritual Friendship in Salesian Spirituality

Natural Friendship

The ancients recognized how important and essential friendship is for human development. They called friendship "*necessitudo*" -- necessity. Cicero called friendship the "sun of life, . . . the best gift which the immortal gods have given us with the exception of wisdom."¹

The word "friendship" is loosely used to refer to many kinds of human relationships which are hardly worthy of the name. One of the earliest careful analysis of the nature of friendship was made by Aristotle. His counterpart among the Romans was Cicero. The true and perfect friendship, as Aristotle notes, has the good for its object, i.e., the friends each seek what is good for the other. They love each other not for what they can get out of the relationship but for what they are. This kind of friendship unites good people, those who are similar through virtue. They become useful and agreeable (pleasure-giving) because each of those united in friendship is good in himself and good for each other²

Cicero sees the basis of friendship in the instinctive desire we have for sociability and defines it as "a personal accord of the will, of tastes and of thoughts, or more completely an accord (*consensio*) on all human things accompanied by benevolence and affection." It can only exist among good people, i.e., those esteemed for their "loyalty, their integrity, their equanimity, their liberality" (*Dict.*, col. 503). Both Aristotle and Cicero believed that this kind of friendship is rare because the number of people who are capable of entering and sustaining such a friendship is very limited.

The ideas on friendship of Aristotle and Cicero have become part of the patrimony of Western civilization and were passed on to such notables as Sts. Ambrose, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

Salesian Conception of Friendship

The influence of Aristotle and Cicero is particularly evident in St. Francis de Sales' conception of friendship. Some of Aristotle's ideas are deftly woven into the saint's conference on friendship, which is generally called "On Cordiality." De Sales defines cordiality as the "essence of a true and sincere friendship which can only exist between reasonable persons and which stirs up and nourishes their friends."³ He goes on to explain that there can be love but not friendship between human beings and animals. So De Sales would definitely not subscribe to the idea that "dog is man's best friend." Most friendships are not real friendships because they are not based on or brought about by reason. Hence they do not merit the name of friendship. He explains this in greater detail in the third part of the *Introduction to a Devout Life*.⁴

But reason alone is not sufficient to bring about friendship. In addition, "there must be a certain affinity or compatibility (*correspondance*), either in vocation, or aim, or state among those who develop a friendship, as experience plainly teaches us"⁵ This affinity draws people together, but not all of these human relationships result in true friendships. Francis distinguishes between the love of benevolence and the love of concupiscence or an acquisitive kind of love. The love of concupiscence makes us love something for the advantage that we expect from it, whereas a love of benevolence makes us love something for its own good. Friendships are formed when we love others for their own sakes. But if this love is not acknowledged and reciprocated, then it is called a love of simple benevolence. "When it is exercised with mutual correspondence, it is called the love of friendship. Mutual correspondence consists in three things. It is necessary that friends love one another, that they know they love one another, and that they have communication, intimacy, and familiarity with one another."⁶

The emphasis that De Sales gives to the role of communication in friendships helps us to better grasp its nature and to distinguish true friendships from those that are not worthy of the name. Communication is absolutely essential in friendship, which is nothing more than a mutual reciprocal love based on communication. So if two people love each other, know about their love but do not communicate, there is love but no friendship. In his view, ". . . friendship is the most dangerous love of all because the other loves can exist without communication, but friendship being totally based on it, we can hardly have a friendship with a person without sharing this person's qualities" (*Devout Life*, p.164).

The nature of friendship is determined by what is communicated. "According to the diversity of communications, friendship also differs, and the communications differ according to the variety of the goods that they communicate to each other" (*Devout Life*, p. 165) If what is communicated is evil, vain and frivolous, then the friendship is evil, vain and frivolous. For a true and genuine friendship to exist, something good has to be communicated. The higher and more noble this good is, the more noble the friendship will be. The best kind of friendship is the one in which "mutual and reciprocal communications relate to charity, devotion, and Christian perfection . . ." (*Devout Life*, p.170). This is what is known as a spiritual friendship.

Spiritual Friendships

In a general way, all true friendships are spiritual in the sense that they involve our spiritual faculties -- the intellect and will. Obviously this is not what is meant by spiritual friendship in the saint's mind. We call those friendships spiritual which are created, sustained and nurtured by the Holy Spirit. Francis makes this perfectly clear when he writes to one of his Philotheas: ". . . it is the Spirit of God who is the author of the holy friendship which we have for each other" (OEA, XV, 172). The primary goal of a spiritual friendship is to assist us to grow in the spiritual life by becoming more closely united to God and to one another. So for Francis a spiritual friendship is that "by which two, three or more souls share their devotion and spiritual affection, and become one spirit" (Devout Life, p.203). The love that exists in a spiritual friendship is not that of simple charity, which we must have for all. It is rather a preferential love, which De Sales frequently calls by the name of "dilection". In his letters, the expression "*sainte dilection*" (holy dilection) or simply dilection means spiritual friendship as does the expression "*sainte communication*" (holy communication).

Theological Basis for Spiritual Friendships

The Salesian conception of spiritual friendship is grounded on the biblical truth that we are made in the image and likeness of God. This means that in our very make-up we were created and destined to love as God loves. "Just as God created man in his own image and likeness, so also did he ordain a love for man in the image and likeness of his divinity" (*Love of God*, I, p. 170). We are all made in the image and likeness of the Trinitarian God.

So we are all called to love as the three divine persons love. Interestingly enough, Francis views the love that exists in the Blessed Trinity as the holiest kind of spiritual friendship imaginable. ". . . if friendship is to be loved and desired", he exclaims, "what friendship can be so in comparison with that infinite friendship which is between the Father and the Son..." (*Love of God*, I, p.196). Francis stresses that communication is natural to the Trinity. "From all eternity," De Sales explains, "there is in God an essential communication by which the Father, in producing the Son, communicates his entire, infinite and indivisible divinity to the Son" (*Love of God*, I, p.111).

The Incarnation is seen as God communicating Himself to a human creature in an ecstasy of love. Because God has communicated himself to us, we are able to be in communication with him; we are capable of being the friends of God. This bond of friendship is created through charity. We love God for the love of him, out of consideration for his sovereign and lovable goodness. It is a "true friendship for it is reciprocal. . . . We are in constant communication with him, who does not cease to speak to our hearts by inspirations, attractions and sacred movements" (*Love of God*, I, pp.160-161).

In basing his teaching on friendship on the truth that we are made in the image and likeness of God, De Sales affirms that similarity is the origin and birth of friendship. Since all human beings are made in God's image and likeness, we love them "in their character as very holy and living images of the divinity" (*Love of God*, II, p.171). It is important to point out that man is created to communicate with God and as a consequence to communicate with other human beings,

especially by the love of friendship. This optimistic conception of human nature contrasts sharply with the pessimistic view frequently espoused by Ionesco, a number of whose plays dwell on the inability of human beings to communicate with one another.

But similarity does not fully explain how friendship comes about. Francis stresses the notion that friendship has its origin in complementary qualities as well. "In addition," he says, "to this congruity based on likeness, there is an unparalleled correspondence between God and man. . ." (Love of God, I, p.91). By rooting our understanding of spiritual friendship in the Trinity, Francis is able to draw out of it an almost inexhaustible richness. In the love of friendship which exists in the Trinity, persons are safeguarded even though they are continually communicating themselves to each other. In this friendship, the identity of each is never lost or overshadowed by the other. This has very positive implications for human friendship.

It is through spiritual friendship that a person becomes what he/she is. In order to enter into a spiritual friendship, people have to accept themselves as they are. We have to first be a friend to ourselves before we can become a friend to another. True friendship modeled after that of the Trinity requires that friends have a very profound respect for each other. Nonetheless, ". . . it demands that we challenge our friends to be who and what they really are without ever implying in the challenge a withdrawal of our affection for them." ⁷

We find a good deal of original and creative thinking in the way De Sales develops his ideas on friendship and especially spiritual friendship. It is true that Richard of St. Victor saw in the Trinity the model of human friendship in his De Trinitate. Before Francis, St. Thomas Aquinas spoke of charity as a love of friendship. De Sales' originality lies in the ecstatic and dynamic character that he gives to the love of benevolence and hence to the love of friendship. This ecstatic quality is derived from his conception of trinitarian love and how it reached or went out of itself in the mystery of the Incarnation. The dynamic aspect of Salesian love makes us readily understand and appreciate the reciprocity and communication that are essential to the love of friendship.

A friendship based on charity is preferential but not exclusive. Its ecstatic quality makes friends reach out to others in need. Hence it supports them in perfecting their love of neighbor. When it fails to do so, then it is not a true friendship.

Spiritual Direction and Friendship

In Salesian spirituality, friendship goes hand-in-hand with spiritual direction. This is a valuable insight, which Father Ravier demonstrates in his excellent study of St. Francis de Sales' correspondence. This study resulted in a work entitled *François de Sales. Lettres*

d'amitié spirituelle (Francis de Sales. Letters of Spiritual Friendship). ⁸ We would normally call them "letters of spiritual direction." Ravier justifies the title by explaining that what emerges from these letters is a "fundamental and essential law of the saint's correspondence", viz., that for De Sales spiritual direction cannot be divorced from spiritual friendship, "that is to say, there is exchange, communication, reciprocal influence" (Ravier, p.x). Fr. Ravier describes Francis' involvement with persons he directed as follows:

He walks step by step, searches, asks, probes, questions, suffers, hopes, prays with Philothea and Theotimus, and he only feels completely at ease when he becomes with his correspondent "one heart, one soul, and one spirit" to the extent that his correspondence informs us as much about his most intimate feelings as about those of the people under his direction. (Ravier, p. x)

At the outset of this spiritual journey that Francis makes with Philothea and Theotimus, he leads them to come to grips with two basic questions: (1) What is life all about? or What meaning does it have for you? and (2) Are you determined to follow the tendency that God has placed in your heart to seek the good, the beautiful, the true? This is accomplished first by keeping the friend aware of eternity not merely as a future existence, but as beginning right here and now in time. To keep eternity always before our eyes requires a very deep and intimate attachment (read friendship) to God (Cf. Ravier, p.363).

The Saint's Spiritual Friends

The beautiful and touching friendship which Francis established with Antoine Favre, one which lasted for 30 years, is very instructive on the way in which De Sales conceives of spiritual friendship. At the very outset, Francis is very conscious of the fact that the basis of the friendship is benevolent love. (At that time, he was only 26 years old.) He views Antoine Favre's letter to him seeking his friendship as a pledge of Favre's benevolent love for him. His response to this letter begins: "I received your letter, and this precious and unexpected pledge of your benevolence for me has so filled me with joy and admiration that my mind remains powerless to express my feelings to you" (OEA, XI,18). He mentions benevolence two other times in this letter. So while still in his twenties, he understood very clearly the kind of love that true friendship requires.

In the second letter, Francis states that he needs Favre's benevolence more than ever as he approaches ordination to the priesthood (OEA, XI,40). He explains that "it is customary among those who are friends to confide their worries and apprehensions at the moment of undertaking an arduous and dangerous work in order to obtain some consolation" (OEA, XI,38).

Obviously spiritual friendships are not entered into merely for mutual consolation and sympathy. The ability for friends to be compassionate toward each other and to communicate "is an incontestable sign or mark of friendship" (OEA, XI, 40). As one writer puts it: ". . . friendship can be for us a veritable school of sympathy, susceptible of progressively extending itself to all human beings and finally to the cosmos itself."⁹ Compassion for others is an essential aspect of spiritual friendships, and it is evident in Francis' relations with Antoine Favre. He writes to him: "Indeed I am afraid that, according to our habit of not regarding as foreign to us anything that touches humanity, your rather tender heart might have a little difficulty in standing the sight of the miseries of our dear homeland . . ." (OEA, XI, 112-113).

In his spiritual letters, De Sales urges his friends to reach out to the poor, especially the higher up they are on the social ladder. This is a kind of reality therapy that does not keep the friendship in the clouds but keeps it very much down to earth. If it does not engender compassion for others outside of the circle of friends, then the spiritual friendship is not genuine.

Throughout his correspondence with Antoine Favre, Francis frequently repeats that his friend is constantly on his mind or present to him: "You are always present to my soul, and principally at the altar . . ." He tells Favre that he longs to see him and deeply treasures and values his friendship. "It seems to me", the saint writes, "that our friendship is boundless and being so firmly planted in my heart, it is as old as my heart itself" (OEA, XIV, 388).

In spiritual friendships there is created a strong bond of community or communion:

The souls that God has made completely one are inseparable, for who can separate "that which God has joined?" No, not death or anything will ever separate us from the unity, which lives forever in our hearts. (OEA, XVI, 296)

In another letter to St. Jane de Chantal, Francis remarks that the love of friendship empties their hearts of "all multiplicity so that there is in the heart only the sovereign uniting of the Holy Trinity" (OEA, XVIII, 235). Francis makes it very clear that the kind of love that binds spiritual friends together is that love of friendship which exists in the Holy Trinity -- a love with and for others creating a holy communion analogous to that in the Trinity.

The profound union that Francis experienced with Mère Angélique Arnaud is compared to the unity that existed among the first Christians:

Your consolation consoles my heart, which is strongly united to yours that nothing is ever received in one which the other does not share in. . . . It seems to me appropriate to use the language of the primitive Church -- "one heart and one soul." (OEA, XIX, 14)

Friends who are so joined together by God cannot be separated by distance or time. (Cf. OEA, XVIII, 416). This kind of union is not achieved unless there is a good deal of openness, exchange of feelings, and frequent communication. It takes also a great sensitivity to the needs of the friend and a rather affectionate and warm nature that readily responds to others. In a moving passage, the saint opens his heart completely to St. Jane: ". . . there is no soul in the world, it seems to me, that loves more affectionately, more tenderly and, to say it once and for all, more lovingly than I. For it pleased God to make my heart this way." This does not mean that the saint is given to a saccharine sentimentality for he hastens to add: "But nonetheless, I love independent and vigorous souls who are not effeminate. For an excessive tenderness confounds the heart, disquiets it and distracts it from affectionate prayer toward God [and] hinders complete resignation and the death of self-love. . ." (OEA, XX, 216).

The profound union that exists in spiritual friendship does not destroy the personality or the individuality of friends. In fact, it helps them reach a deeper level of understanding and enables them to become what they are. This is perhaps the greatest difficulty that people have in human relations, especially in trying to create friendship. Many people are basically not happy themselves. They continually wish they had this or that quality of someone they admire very much to the point that they do not accept themselves as they are. This is why, time and time again, Francis urges the virtues of gentleness, patience and humility -- patience, especially with

ourselves. And so he says to Madame Brulart: "Let us be what we are and let us be it well to pay honor to the Master Worker whose handiwork we are" (OEA, XII, 53-54).

Because Francis has such a deep respect for his friends and wants them to be what they are, he does not force his opinions on them and can differ with them in serious matters without destroying the friendship. A good example of this was his friendship with Claude-Nicolas de Quoex and his brother Phillip. These two very dear friends of his had different views on how to reform the monastery of Talloires. De Sales tells them that he does not want to force his opinions on them: ". . . I do not think that either my feelings, nor my opinions, nor my interests should serve as a rule to anyone in the world, and particularly to my friends. . . . Let each one follow his own judgment as long as Christ is glorified" (OEA, XVI, 114).

Another very striking quality of his friendships is that they enlarge the circle of his friends. He became very close friends of the spouses and children of his friends. There exists voluminous correspondence with the children of his friends, especially those of St. Jane and Antoine Favre (Cf. Ravier, p. 43).

The uniqueness of his concept of friendship is also demonstrated by the fact that he established a spiritual friendship with the members of his immediate family -- his mother, brothers and sisters. All of them, except his father who died early (1601), chose him as their spiritual director and confessor. He was able to open up his heart to them as too few can to their own flesh and blood. On the death of his youngest brother Bernard, he wrote to his sister Gasparde: "For me, my dear sister, I cried more than once on this occasion, for I loved this brother of mine tenderly and was not able to control the pangs of sorrow which nature caused me" (OEA, XVII, 17).

There is no doubt that among all of the spiritual friendships which Francis established some were more intense and intimate than others. Mère Angélique Arnaud tells us: "I was surprised at the freedom and goodness with which he told me his most secret thoughts after I...had told him all mine" (Ravier, p. 662). Unfortunately, very little of Francis' correspondence with her has come down to us. He evidently had a very close and strong relationship with her. But of all of his spiritual friendships the one that he had with St. Jane de Chantal was unsurpassed.

De Sales' first letter to her gives us marvelous insights into his ideas on friendship and spiritual direction. He individualizes the letter by seizing on two things, which to him are paramount and upon which he will build all of his further spiritual direction. From his talks with her at Dijon, he learned about her strong desire to attain Christian perfection and her loving acceptance of her state of widowhood. He suggests that she nourish these fundamental options by periodically meditating on them to see just where her heart was in relationship to them. Francis advises her to do this if she wants to because "in all things and everywhere, I desire that you have a holy spirit of freedom regarding the means of perfecting yourself, provided that these two columns [i.e., the two options] are preserved and affirmed" (OEA, XII, 265).

So from the outset, Francis lays down the basic principle of spiritual direction and spiritual friendship -- "a spirit of freedom" -- which will be the approach he uses in guiding her and all of his other "*dirigés*." This is practically the opposite approach taken by St. Jane's confessor at

Dijon, who placed her under strict obedience to him, a method that was fairly common in those days.

Francis is sensitive to the difficulties St. Jane was experiencing with her confessor. He, ever so gently, made her understand the basis and nature of spiritual direction and spiritual friendship. The only thing that binds us together and obligates us is "charity and true Christian friendship whose bond is called by St. Paul 'the bond of perfection' which it truly is for it is indissoluble and never experiences any abatement." So the relationship is essentially one of love and freedom and not of constraint, fear or anxiety. This is why he goes on to explain:

All the other bonds are temporal, even those of the vows of obedience, which are broken by death and for many other reasons. But the bond of charity grows with time and becomes stronger with time. It is exempt from the sword of death
There you have our chains which the more they are pulled together and tightened, the more elbow room and freedom they give. (OEA, XII, 285)

We see a specific application of this principle in a later letter. Even though he gives St. Jane very specific prayers to say and thoughts to take, Francis does not mean to constrain her in any way. So he lays down the very well-known dictum that is the hallmark of his spiritual direction: "You must do all for love and nothing through force. You must love obedience more than you fear disobedience"(OEA, XII, 359).

This is another example of the spirit of freedom which he so treasured. In this same letter, he gives a lengthy explanation of what he means by a spirit of freedom. He defines it as "a disengagement of the Christian heart from all things in order to follow the known will of God" (OEA, XII, 363). The first mark or characteristic of this spirit of freedom is that "the heart which has this freedom is not at all attached to consolations." The second characteristic is: "It in no way engages its affection to spiritual exercises in such a way that if, through sickness or other occurrence, the person is prevented from them, he does not harbor any regret." A spirit of freedom makes individuals deal with situations as they occur with the objective always in mind of being sensitive to what God wants of them at that particular moment, rather than absolutizing certain spiritual practices to which a person has been accustomed, and of being available to others when the need arises. So the spirit of freedom has wonderful effects:

The effects of this freedom are a great spirit of kindness, gentleness and willingness to do everything that is not sin or danger of sin. It is that gently pliable disposition necessary for the exercise of all virtue and charity. (OEA, XII, 363).

Since De Sales was so open and frank with St. Jane in expressing his thoughts, feelings and affection for her and others, he asked her not to share his letters with her confessor because they are "a bit too frank and affectionate to be seen" by other eyes (OEA, XII, 398-399). So he opens up his heart to her in telling her about the temptation against his vocation (OEA, XIII, 368). He describes to her his innermost feelings at the death of his beloved mother in very touching terms. "I had a lump in my throat and cried over this dear mother more than I have ever cried since I entered the ecclesiastical state, but this was without spiritual bitterness" (OEA, XIV, 262).

The Immortality of Friendship

As was mentioned above, Francis encourages his friends to think about eternity and what role it is meant to play in spiritual friendships. It was unthinkable for him that a true friendship, i.e., a spiritual friendship, could ever come to an end. By its very nature, it was made to last forever (Cf. OEA, XIX, 343). To the question put to him by one of his friends about their friendship, Francis responds so eloquently and so affectionately:

Here is the question you asked: "Will your heart love mine always and in all seasons?" And here is my answer: O my very dear brother, it is the maxim of three great lovers of the Church, all three great saints, all three great teachers of moral theology: St. Ambrose, St. Jerome and St. Augustine: "The friendship that can end was never a true friendship."

A spiritual friendship "never changes except into a more perfect union of spirits, a living image of the blessed friendship existing in heaven" (Devout Life, p.173). So Francis sees the love of friendship as the beginning of the kind of happiness that we will experience in heaven where we will be a source of joy to one another. He says this explicitly in the meditation on Paradise. The Blessed "give to one another unspeakable contentment and live in the consolation of a happy and indissoluble union" (Devout Life, p. 61).

If this holds true for all of the blessed, even for those millions upon millions we have never known, how much more will it be for those whom we have had for friends on this earth. "...the friendships which were good in this life will continue eternally in the next" (OEA, X, 240).

For Jean-Paul Sartre hell was other people. We could say that for Francis de Sales, heaven is other people. Albert Camus tells us in his book *The Plague* that "it is not wrong to want to be happy, but it is wrong to want to be happy all alone." In his teaching on friendship, Francis tells us that it is possible to be happy together here and in eternity.

Notes

1. *De Amicitia* as cited by B. Vansteenbergh in "Amitié", *Dictionnaire de la spiritualité*, (Paris: Beauchesne & Fils, 1937), I, col.503). All English translations are the author's.

2. Cf. *The Ethics of Aristotle*, trans. J.A.K. Thomson (Penguin Books, 1955), p.263.

3. François de Sales, *Oeuvres de saint François de Sales, évêque et Prince de Genève et Docteur de l'Eglise, édition complète*, 26 vols. (Annecy: J. Niérat, 1892-1932), VI, 54. This work will be cited as OEA in future references. All English translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.

4. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, trans. John K. Ryan, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963, 1955).

5. *The Spiritual Conferences of St. Francis de Sales*, trans. Abbot Gasquet and Canon Mackey, (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1962), p.55.

6. Francis de Sales, *On the Love of God*, trans. John K. Ryan, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963), I, 88.
 7. Andrew Greeley, *The Friendship Game*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), p. 93.
 8. *François de Sales Correspondance: Lettres d'amitié spirituelle*, édition établie et annotée par André Ravier, S.J. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1980). All English translations are the author's.
 9. Ignace Lepp, *The Ways of Friendship, A Psychological Explanation of Man's Most Valuable Relationship*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), p. 53.
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