

# Precious, but Prudent?: A Reflection on Opposite-Sex Friendships



In his *Theology of the Body*, Pope John Paul II posits, “Christ teaches that the meaning of life is to love as he loves (see Jn 15:12). One of the Pope’s main insights is that God inscribed this vocation to love as he loves *in our bodies* by creating us male and female and calling us to become ‘one flesh.’” (TBB 2). Indeed, he says that the “deepest yearning of the human heart is to be ‘like God’ by sharing in his life and love” and that “[o]ur creation as male and female and our longing for communion is

‘the fundamental fact’ of human existence” (TBB 35, 120).

If our deepest yearning is to share in God’s life and love, and one of the principal ways to do so is through the intimate opposite-gender relationship we call marriage, it is no wonder that some may think it is difficult — and perhaps even impossible! — for men and women to be “just friends.”

If, as John Paul argues, men and women have an inherent “longing for communion,” it makes sense that men and women who are attracted to each other in friendship might also find their feelings of friendship deepening into something more. Readers themselves may have experienced

the deep sharing and confiding that can occur in a close opposite-gender friendship, which may lead to feelings of “this person knows me so well, better than anyone else—we must be soul mates.” This is fine when neither party is married, as relationships like marriage “should be based on nothing less than friendship” (LR 92). But the married cannot allow such progression to occur in their opposite-gender friendships.

## The Sanctity of Marriage

This topic is not one to be taken lightly. The love between husband and wife is described by the Church as “an image of

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TBB: As quoted by Christopher West in *Theology of the Body for Beginners* (West Chester, PA: Ascension Press, 2004).



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the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man. It is good, very good, in the Creator's eyes." (CCC #1604). The Church also acknowledges that the "union

### ***Editor's note:***

For simplicity, the author's secondary sources are abbreviated as follows:

GS: *Gaudium et Spes*;

LR: John Paul II (Karol

Wojtyla), *Love and*

*Responsibility* (San

Francisco, Ignatius, 1993);

[between man and woman] has always been threatened by" disorder caused by the "regime of sin," including infidelity (CCC #1606). The encyclical *Gaudium et Spes* warns that the "well-being of the individual person and of both human and Christian society is closely bound up with the healthy state of conjugal and family life" (GS 47). A spouse must not let anything—or anyone—interfere with that healthy state.

This does not mean, however, that men and women can't and shouldn't be friends. The *Catechism* itself states, "Whether it develops between persons of the same or opposite sex, friendship represents a great good for all. It leads to spiritual communion" (CCC #2347). According to one seminarian friend of mine, men

studying to be priests are encouraged to have "a good balance of women and men friends." However, such opposite-gender friendships should not be without guidelines.

Though the Church doesn't list specific guidelines for opposite-gender friendships—e.g., activities to be avoided—she is clear in her esteem for the virtue of prudence:

*Prudence* is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it ... it guides the other virtues by setting rule and measure. It is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience. The prudent man determines and directs his conduct in accordance with this judgment. With the help of this virtue we apply moral principles to particular cases without error and overcome doubts about the good to achieve and the evil to avoid. (CCC #1806, 1811).

Put another way, "[h]onest people know their limits. They know what situations would make them stumble and avoid them with the seriousness Christ demands of us" (TBB 51). Praying for prudence, then, is a wonderful way to help ensure one's opposite-gender friendships do not become inappropriate.

### **More Specific Guidelines**

An informal survey of committed Catholics revealed some common-sense wisdom regarding extra-marital friendships. It was generally acknowledged to be inappropriate to share secrets and other private issues, especially those having to do with one's marriage, with an opposite-gender friend. Similarly, time alone together should be strictly limited, and anything resembling a "date" should be avoided. "There has to be a certain point where the closeness stops," observes Donna-Marie Cooper O'Boyle, a bestselling

author, wife and mother. She offers some easy-to-remember phrases to jot down and remember for those who are trying to discern whether or not an opposite-gender friendship is okay:

- \* “The friendship cannot be as important as the marriage.”
- \* “The marriage takes precedence at all times.”
- \* “The spouse should be considered your *best* friend”

Wife, mom, and author Karen Edmisten distinguishes between friendship at “platonic levels at which there is no physical attraction (and therefore no threat of temptation or the near occasion of sin”), and “other levels of friendship ... in which there is just enough attraction that the friendship could progress to romance.” She also offers the following prudent questions to ask yourself if you are wondering about a particular opposite-gender friendship:

- \* Is this friendship truly a friendship? Or, is there something more going on here?
- \* Is it helpful to me spiritually, or is it a temptation?

Pontifical Household preacher Capuchin Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa believes that, for the married, the “surest friendships are those that a couple cultivates together. Among those friendships that are cultivated separately, those with persons of the same sex create fewer problems than those with persons of the opposite sex.” Father also pointed particularly to newlyweds as those who may suffer from “difficulties and crises” when friendships are not “rearranged” appropriately.

And the same seminarian who shared that he and his confreres are encouraged to have “a good balance of women and men friends” also said that they are told to use good judgment. “We are told when you meet with a parishioner, whether it is man, woman, or child, to tell the secretary that you

**Warning Signs:** Is your opposite-gender friendship inappropriate? Does it have underlying chemistry that could be damaging to your marriage? Ask yourself the following questions:

- (1) Do I tell my friend secrets or details of my marriage that should remain private?
- (2) Do my friend and I have secrets that I haven’t shared with my spouse?
- (3) Do my friend and I regularly spend time alone together?
- (4) Has anyone ever mistaken my friend for my spouse because of how we get along?
- (5) Do I find myself looking forward to seeing my friend in an excessive or romantic way?
- (6) Do I take special care with my appearance when I know I’m going to see my friend?
- (7) Do I ever think that my friend knows me as well as or better than my own spouse?
- (8) Do I ever wish my spouse was more like my friend? That he treated me more like my friend does? That he understood me as well as my friend does?
- (9) Do I ever feel, deep down, like my friendship borders on “too close for comfort for a married person”?
- (10) Do I ever feel like my friend wishes our friendship was “something more”?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, prudence might require you to pull away from your friendship and work ever harder at maintaining a healthy marriage and home life. Consider seeking guidance from a trusted spiritual guide (such as a priest or other religious). Pray, pray, pray for the grace to be able to discern correctly, and to have the strength to do what God asks of you.

have an appointment and if there is no glass in the door, then keep your door somewhat open.”

### Conclusion

Whether same-gender or opposite-gender, friendship is a wonderful, necessary part of human life, and one that can help us grow in holiness. St. Francis of Assisi and St. Clare had such a friendship, as did St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane Francis de Chantal, to name just a few. And of course we read in Scripture about Jesus’ friendships with Mary Magdalene and Lazarus’ sisters Mary and Martha, in an age and a society in which such friendships were not common. As Fr. Cantalamessa puts it, how “wonderful and consoling to know that Jesus knew and cultivated that

sentiment that is so beautiful and precious for us men—friendship.”

In *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis puts it this way: “What a wonderful gift we’re given in true friends—those who desire a good for you just as I desire for myself ... those who cause you to say, ‘What? You, too? I thought that no one but myself ...’—in short, those who help us to know, love, and serve God ever more deeply” (p.78).



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