

WOMEN OF GRACE

True
Friendship

Dear Sacred Sister,

This is an important time for woman. Throughout his pontificate, St. John Paul II has written extensively on the dignity, nature and role of woman in the plan of God, and has exhorted her to come to a deeper experience of her essential nature and spirit which he calls the *genius of woman* or the *feminine genius*.

Part of her feminine genius is her ability to create and foster genuine friendships. In this short mini-study, we reflect on the importance of “true friendship,” how we find them, and how we become them.

I pray it will be a fruitful discussion which will lead you to deepening relationships with the women of grace in your life, your sacred sisters.

Gratefully yours,
Johnnette

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True Friendship

All true friendships are to reflect God's own love for us, and we are to be a reflection of God's love for others.

Webster defines "friend" as "a person whom one knows well and is fond of; intimate associate; close acquaintance." But Scripture gives us a fuller and richer definition:

A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter; he that has found one has found a treasure. There is nothing so precious as a faithful friend, and no scales can measure his excellence (Sirach 6:14).

All true friendship rests on charity. St. Augustine writes, “There is no true friendship unless you weld it between souls that cleave together through the charity shed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.”

What specifically characterizes the kind of friendship that “welds” souls together? Aristotle outlined five characteristics of such friendship:

- 1. willing the friend's good,*
- 2. being glad that he is alive,*
- 3. taking pleasure in living with him,*
- 4. having the same preferences, and*
- 5. sharing in his grief and joy.*

St. Thomas Aquinas reduces these five qualities to three: benevolence, mutual love, and community of life.

What do these holy attributes mean and how do they affect a relationship?

Benevolence

Benevolence is the cornerstone of friendship and is its foundational element. In Mark 12:28-34, Jesus describes benevolence to a scribe in this way: Loving our neighbor as ourselves is second only to loving God with all our being.

Because we desire only the ultimate good for ourselves, benevolence requires that we desire the ultimate good for our friends as well. From a Christian perspective, this means that we seek the eternal salvation of our friends as we seek our own. Thus, benevolence wills the supernatural good of a friend. Our friendship should be a source of grace for both parties, and the relationship should be a reflection of holiness in the world. True friendship turns away from that which is temporal and fleeting, and toward that which is immortal and everlasting.

Benevolence seeks the best interests of the other, and because of this it dispels willfulness and stubbornness. It dispels envy or manipulation. It dispels selfishness and deceit. It dispels pride and arrogance. Rather, benevolence instills openness and love, faith and confidence, right judgment and joy.

Mutual Love

This second characteristic of true friendship is about godly reciprocity. Because true friendship is a gesture of love, it requires a response. In a true spiritual friendship, affection and goodwill must be shared. A friend must be perceived as “the half of my soul,” as St. Augustine says.

Sacred Scripture provides us with some beautiful examples of mutual love: Jonathan and David (1 Sam 18-20), Ruth and Naomi (in the book of Ruth), Jesus and Lazarus (John 11:1-44), and Paul and Timothy (1 and 2 Timothy) are just a few examples that show the value and worth of mutual love expressed in true friendship. In them, we see mutual love as the icon of self-donation, the ultimate reality of a God-centered friendship.

The following checklist helps us see the quality of our friendships with regard to mutual love:

- 1. Do we put our friends' needs and wants above our own desires?*
- 2. Are we miserly with our time, or are we always ready to listen?*
- 3. Are we ready to pray with our friend, offer him counsel, or just be present to him when circumstances demand?*
- 4. Do we demonstrate concern for our friends' spiritual well-being?*
- 5. Are we willing to experience discomfort and trial for the welfare of our friend?*
- 6. Do we strive to overcome our weaknesses, failings, and sins in order to become a better friend? Or do we make excuses and assume our friend will "understand?"*

Community Life

Without fear of reprisal or judgment, friends share with each other their innermost thoughts and feelings. St. Ambrose of Milan says, “Let us show a friend our heart, and he will open his to us...A friend, if he is true, hides nothing.” St. Jerome says, “A friend must speak to his friend freely as to his second self.” Such openness of heart is a by-product of community of life.

Essential to community is the concept of “togetherness.” It is impossible to maintain a friendship without togetherness, and togetherness requires an investment in time: time spent together in holy conversation, in prayer, and in sharing joys, sufferings, hopes, and dreams. Such community of life spent between friends offers the perfect setting in which to grow together in Christian fidelity and faith. It lays the foundation of mutual trust upon which can then be built the virtues of generosity, long-suffering, compassion, humility, empathy, loyalty, and fraternal correction — all indispensable to true friendship.

True friendship radiates dignity and beauty, love and joy, peace and happiness. It heals the heart, transforms the soul, and breathes life into the spirit. True friendship shines with charity, sparkles with hope, and gleams with faith. It is resplendent with benevolence, mutual love, and community of life. Ultimately, true friendship, woven into the fabric of the heart by the Holy Spirit, becomes the path on which true friends sojourn to heaven together. Thus, time spent with a true friend is laden with *kairos* moments and yields abundant fruit in our life and in the life of our friend as well.

1. How many of your relationships would you say are true friendships? How do these friendships exemplify the three characteristics of a true friendship?
2. Look up one of the famous friendships cited from Sacred Scripture. What impresses you most about that friendship?
3. How do you think true friendships help us to grow in the gift of wisdom? Considering this, why are true friendships full of *kairos* moments?



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