

From the desk of Fr. Tim

The Value of Friends (Part 1)

We speak a lot about community in the Catholic Church. In the post Vatican II era, the concept of the unity of the people of God has become one of the primary focal points of the renewal of the Church, its liturgy and its everyday life. Another look at this might be helpful.

In the final days of the earthly life of Jesus, he spent time with his disciples, seemingly setting the stage for them to understand the Cross. The Cenacle (upper room of prayer) became a kind of magnet for the disciples. They would return there after the Death of their Lord. It is not merely coincidental that the apparent reason for their first gathering there is to celebrate the Passover meal. This sacred meal formed the community while they were still slaves in Egypt. Their homes became the setting for people to share this meal and to become the ones whom God would save.

“You shall observe this as a perpetual ordinance for yourselves and your descendants. Thus, you must also observe this rite when you have entered the land which the LORD will give you as he promised. When your children ask you, ‘What does this rite of yours mean?’ you shall reply, ‘This is the Passover sacrifice of the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt; when he struck down the Egyptians, he spared our houses.’”

(Exodus 12:24-27)

It is against this backdrop that the disciples gather with Jesus in the upper room. They, too, remember the great act of God to save them from slavery. Now God has a greater miracle to accomplish. The gift of life will be granted them through the Lamb of God, who is his Son, Jesus.

Three events take place in the Cenacle that replace all the institutions and festivals of the Old Covenant, and effectively form the new community of God’s People.

First, Jesus gives the new commandment to “love one another.” This love forms not only the substance of our relationship with God, but also the relationships within this new community. It is important to understand all of the dynamics of this “love”, but as a summary it is chiefly defined by the cross. It is the willingness to set aside our own self-protection, our ego, even our own life.

Second, he institutes the Mass and commands it as the way that we will recall his teachings and his actions. The word of God becomes flesh for us in the bread and wine of the altar. The unseen power of God forms our heart to make us recognizable as members of his body.

Finally, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. He takes the role of the lowest servant of a household as an example of how we should treat one another.

Of course, this is the unmistakable action of God that has as its sole purpose to make us God's people. The relationship that we are to have with God is also the relationship we are to have with one another. Just as we are commanded to love God, so are we commanded to love one another. While still in the category of mystery, it is possible to identify some characteristics of this relationship within the Church.

First, we are to be friends. Even for those who have developed a reasonable prayer life, studied the Scriptures well and even excelled in their status in the church, friendship is sometimes elusive. There are certain personality traits, such as shyness or even a kind of aloofness that can stand in the way of this holy friendship. Our society fosters loneliness which is a seedbed for many sins. The Church is called to friendship. While it may be seen as a gift, it is in fact a decision that we make. It is the result of intentionally following the command of Jesus.

This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.

(John 15:11-15)

Within the Church, friendship is a bond that has a goal. It is not merely a passive thing. It is actively in pursuit of doing good. In fact, it is the single minded dedication to this goal that forms the bond of friendship. Once that goal is shared between companions, generosity follows to begin to cement the bond. We can put it another way.

The parish church is partially involved in setting before us tasks to accomplish. Sometimes the task is something that we can do with another person. If the parish is doing its job correctly, this task is truly something that accomplishes the goal, of doing good! So, we set about doing it, with someone else. Then along the way, we see that the load they are carrying is a bit much. We step forward and help, out of generosity for them. This is the beginning of a friendship. There is more to this and we will take it up in a second part.