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Goodness and Friendship Through the Ages

Biblical Reflection for 6th Sunday of Easter

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, MAY 13, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- On this Sixth Sunday of Easter, I wish to offer some reflections on the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles [10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48], and then some thoughts on friendship flowing from John's Gospel [15:9-17] and Benedict XVI's teaching.

Christianity demands that the believer not only grasp intellectually the main tenets of the faith, but also act on them in daily life. The extraordinary story of Cornelius' conversion in today's first reading certainly illustrates this message. It is the longest individual narrative in the Acts of the Apostles. The theme of this narrative is divine compulsion: Peter is the least prepared to accept Cornelius into the Christian community, and he even refuses to admit him two times.

Peter had to be converted before he could convert Cornelius. Peter came to the realization that God's gifts were given to all those who listened to the Word of God. His question "Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" [10:47] echoes the Ethiopian's question and Philip's response in the earlier story: "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" [8:36].

Peter's actions with Cornelius had far-reaching implications. Struck at once with the exceptional sincerity, hospitality and deep goodness of Cornelius and his household, Peter spontaneously exclaimed: "God has made it clear to me that no one should call anyone unclean or impure. God shows no partiality."

That statement broke centuries of customs, and even of theology, that Israel alone was God's chosen people, separated from all other nations as God's very own [cf. Deuteronomy 7:6-8; Exodus 19:5-6]. Peter had no choice but to baptize the household of Cornelius and he was criticized for his 'ecumenical' approach, but responded to his critics: "Who am I that I could withstand God?" [11:17]. When his critics heard these words, they were silenced and began to glorify God [11:18].

Paul, too, found the same spontaneous manifestation of the faith among the gentiles, and so made the exciting declaration: "We now turn to the Gentiles!" The controversy over the law was to linger for a long time, so that Paul dedicated to this topic his most comprehensive theological work: the Letter to the Romans.

I call you friends

In today's Gospel text from St. John [15:15], we hear the powerful words: "No longer do I call you servants ... but I have called you friends." We are not useless servants but friends! The Lord calls us friends; he makes us his friends; he gives us his friendship.

Jesus defines friendship in two ways. There are no secrets between friends: Christ tells us everything he hears from the Father; he gives us his full confidence and, with confidence, also knowledge. He reveals his face to

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us, his heart. He shows his tenderness for us, his passionate love that goes to the folly of the cross.

If we were to name one of the most frequent and important themes of Benedict XVI's teaching and preaching over the past four years, it would certainly be his invitation to be a friend of Jesus. He sounded this theme clearly during the Mass "for the election of the Roman Pontiff" in St. Peter's Basilica, before the conclave. "Adult and mature is a faith profoundly rooted in friendship with Christ. This friendship opens us to all that is good and gives us the measure to discern between what is true and what is false, between deceit and truth," he said.

I remember how moved I was as I listened to the Holy Father's homily at the beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome on April 24, 2005. Three times during that memorable homily, Benedict XVI spoke of the importance of "friendship" with Jesus: "The Church as a whole and all her pastors, like Christ, must set out to lead people out of the desert, towards the place of life, toward friendship with the Son of God, toward the One who gives us life, and life in abundance. [...]"

"There is nothing more beautiful than to know him and to speak to others of our friendship with him. [...]"

"Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation."

Eight months later, in his Angelus address of Jan. 15, 2006, Benedict XVI said: "Friendship with the Teacher guarantees profound peace and serenity to the soul, even in the dark moments and in the most arduous trials. When faith meets with dark nights, in which the presence of God is no longer 'felt' or 'seen,' friendship with Jesus guarantees that in reality nothing can ever separate us from his love" (cf. Rom 8: 39).

Again on Aug. 26, 2007, the theme of friendship was front and center: "True friendship with Jesus is expressed in the way of life: It is expressed with goodness of heart, with humility, meekness and mercy, love for justice and truth, a sincere and honest commitment to peace and reconciliation."

We might say that this is the "identity card" that qualifies us as his real "friends"; this is the "passport" that will give us access to eternal life. How do we understand the tremendous gift of friendship in our lives?

Matter of the heart

For many years, I have looked to the life and writings of Cardinal John Henry Newman [1801-1890] as a brilliant model of friendship. Newman truly speaks heart-to-heart -- "cor ad cor loquitur" -- a phrase that he chose as his personal motto. There was nothing superficial about Newman's way of relating to so many different people. He looked at them and loved them for who they were.

Since the beloved English Cardinal's beatification is said to be imminent, let us consider for moment some of Newman's understanding of friendship. Cardinal Newman had a great appreciation for the nobility of human virtues as evidenced in the literature and history of ancient Rome and Greece. At the same time the saints that he most admired -- St. Paul, the ancient Church Fathers, his spiritual father St. Philip Neri, and St. Francis De Sales -- could all be described as humanly attractive.

Newman had an extraordinary capacity and gift for friendship, which often translated into leadership. No one could describe Cardinal Newman as extroverted or light-hearted. We need only to glance at the many volumes of his letters and diaries, or look at the index of names in his autobiographical works, to see that he shared deep friendships with hundreds of people throughout his life. This personal influence has been exerted very powerfully upon millions of people who have read his works and discovered what friendship really means.

Authenticity

I could not write about friendship without passing along a warning to countless women and men who search for it every day. The great popularity of online social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook merits careful attention, reflection and scrutiny. It has been said that if Facebook were a country, it would be the eighth most populated nation worldwide!

We must carefully ask several questions: What is it doing for us?

These tools help to bring people together and improve social networks. For example, homebound, infirm, chronically ill and elderly people can connect with a community of others in the same situation and new bonds of solidarity are born.

But there are also related questions: What is it doing to us? What is it doing to our sense of social boundaries? To our sense of individuality? To our friendships?

Friendship in these virtual spaces is quite different from real time friendship. Friendship is a relationship that involves the sharing of mutual interests, reciprocity, trust, and the revelation of intimate details over time and within specific contexts. True friendship depends on mutual revelations, and can only flourish within the boundaries of privacy and modesty.

On social networking sites, however, there is a concept of public friendship which is not the friendship spoken of by Jesus in the Gospel, nor Benedict XVI in his wonderful writings, nor Cardinal Newman in his letters. The distance and abstraction of our online friendships and online relationships can lead to a kind of systemic desensitization as a culture if we are not wise, prudent and attentive to these new realities.

We expose everything, but are we feeling anything?

Such friendships, or rather acquaintances, are quite different from the "cor ad cor loquitur" so ardently desired and experienced by Jesus with his disciples, or by an impetuous Peter, a Roman official named Cornelius, a British Cardinal named John Henry and a German Pope named Benedict XVI who have modeled their lives on the Good Shepherd and faithful friend to every human being.

[The readings for this Sunday are Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48; 1 John 4:7-10; John 15:9-17.]

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