
Moving Beyond Friendly to Friendship

BY CAROLINNE WHITE

In the rough world of the late Roman Empire, Christians knew friendship was more than superficial human solidarity. Open to the workings of God's grace, they shared their lives according to certain demanding rules. Only when we do the same can our loves link to the chain of God's love, which is so important when distrust and dissension threaten to dominate our lives.

Let's begin with "friendly." Most would readily agree that each of us aspires to behave in a friendly manner in our daily lives towards each person we meet, whether or not we know him or her. Such behavior would involve showing a degree of kindness, concern, and cheerfulness in our interactions with others—in short, making other people feel that we were pleased to have dealings with them, however fleetingly. Furthermore, I think most would agree that a friendly manner can lead to a more permanent relationship, if the friendliness is reciprocated and circumstances are right. Indeed, it may be a necessary element in the birth of friendships. But it is definitely not the same as friendship.

And if it is easy to agree on friendliness, can we also agree about the nature of friendship itself, a topic that has been the subject of discussion for thousands of years? No doubt each of us has his or her own vision of friendship, depending on personal experiences and personality, but we might all still agree that friendship is a relationship between two or a few people who appreciate something special and different in each other, who enjoy each other's company, and generally see eye-to-eye about a variety of matters.

If we are lucky we may make friends easily, sometimes at school or college, which leads me to another characteristic of friendship that we might all agree on: in general, friendship is a lasting relationship, whether for a particular period in our lives or for a lifetime.

Sometimes we may need to seek out friendship, in which case we might look for someone who shares the same interests and has a compatible personality: we may do so by joining a club or by searching on the Internet, using specialist agencies to discover someone suitable to be our friend. In the case of Internet agencies, friendship is often seen as the first step towards marriage. (Since marriage is often regarded as the most serious relationship, who would not wish to be friends with one's spouse?) But if we are fortunate enough to have a spouse whom we consider our best friend, most of us would also hope to have friends outside marriage, usually friends of the same sex as ourselves, though today it is increasingly the case that inter-gender friendships, often continuing out of college relationships or developing in the workplace, can be enjoyed alongside marriage.

And when we are separated from our friends, either temporarily or permanently, we may let the relationship fade or we may decide to make the effort to keep it going: if we cannot enjoy each other's company, we can at least keep up to date with our personal news in which we assume the other person, being a friend, will be interested. For this we may use the telephone or e-mail and digital photos or just good old-fashioned letters, in the hope that such communication will allow the friendship to continue.

All this may be uncontroversial – a description of friendship today that most of us would accept. But do we agree on what the point of friendship is? Does being a friend involve more than being available to make up a foursome for a game of bridge or having someone with whom one enjoys going to the football game? Do we think that friendship involves any duties, apart from the vague and relatively easy one of making an effort to continue the relationship by maintaining contact and showing that we value our friend?

EARLY CHRISTIANS' VIEWS OF FRIENDSHIP

In order to highlight our own thoughts, I would like to put forward some thoughts on friendship held by people in the fourth century.

But how, you may say, can people living sixteen hundred years ago teach us anything on this subject? Why the fourth century? This was a time when it seems that friendship was a very popular concept among Christians in the Roman Empire, popular on a personal level as well as on a social and theological level. We know a good deal about what some of them thought from their writings and letters, written in Latin and Greek. These Christians lived at a time when the Roman Empire was turning Christian at a fast rate after the Roman Emperor gave the go-ahead for Christianity to become an accepted and then the official religion. During a period of two or three generations there was a great excitement about being a Christian, about sharing

and supporting each other at this exhilarating, if difficult, time of new birth. These Christians, whose views we can know, had learned about the theories on friendship developed by the earlier Greeks and Romans in the pre-Christian period, and they put these ideas into the new context of their Christian beliefs. From this combination of pre-Christian and Christian came some interesting ideas which can inspire us to look at friendship with a sharper eye and help us to see its riches for us as Christians.

Consider first of all the pre-Christian sources. Much of what the Greeks and Romans wrote about friendship may seem familiar to us. Like us they valued the company of like-minded people and saw that friends could be helpful and useful to us: these, they agreed, were the most common characteristics of friendships and this is something to which each of us can relate as we think of our own daily lives. They often used such expressions as ‘a friend is a second self’ or ‘friends share everything’ or ‘one soul in two bodies,’ expressions that became proverbial. However, some of them, such as Aristotle,¹ went further, seeing that friendship could play an important part in our moral development and growth in happiness – and this is perhaps something that many of us may find surprising and challenging. Writers in antiquity came to view friendship as consisting of various kinds of relationship, usually seen as friendships based on pleasure, on usefulness, or on virtue (or, as we might say, a striving for goodness). What is more, they agreed that friendships based on virtue, though less common, were better and more likely to last than those based on pleasure or usefulness.

But what did it mean to them to base a friendship on virtue? It meant not only that there were certain duties attached to friendship which friends needed to perform in order

to allow the friendship to continue in a healthy manner: duties such as proving your affection for your friend by your actions, remaining loyal, especially in times of difficulty, and sharing all you have with your friend. It also meant a shared commitment to moral improvement, usually by

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means of the friends’ encouraging, advising, and even criticizing each other, if it is done for the other’s good. According to some, such as Plato, the best kind of friendship also involved a devotion to an external good, or, something one believed was more perfect than oneself and which caused one to love the goodness in one’s friend.² With the addition of this moral dimension, friends are no longer merely useful because they stand by us in difficulties or provide us with

various external benefits; nor are they just loved for their own sake. They are also the means whereby we may be led to wisdom and truth. It is this search for truth and the concern for the other's moral well-being that unites the friends.

To move now from the pre-Christian to the Christian, we find that the early Christians saw the potential of this idea of a shared search for wisdom and truth. They transposed the idea into a Christian context so that the search became a focus on and a love of God, set against a conviction that true friendships are a gift from God. Christian friendship, they believed, differs from non-Christian friendship in that it is born as it were fully formed and perfect through grace and does not need time to develop, but on the other hand it does allow the friends to make progress towards spiritual perfection. Modern Christians may be familiar with the idea of friends sharing a commitment to a common purpose, but most often that goal is not God or spiritual perfection, but rather something like a fundraising project, a book club, or a shared desire to try to lose weight. What really distinguished the early Christian view of friendship was its focus on God and the belief that such a shared focus brought the friends together and indeed brought all Christians who were committed to God together.

The implications of this are pretty radical, for it means that all those who love God are in a sense united as friends. So the circle of friends, which traditionally is quite a small one, extends outwards to include, at least in theory, a large number of people. You might object that this is rather an idealistic and impractical view of friendship: after all it is surely impossible to have the intimate relationship we have with our best friends with lots of people—there just is not enough time in the day. But the early Christians, notably St. Augustine, would have had an answer to your objection: they would have said that even if it was not realistic to be friends with all Christians, this was something that would be possible in the next life, when all are united in loving God and each other. Until then it is something that each of us should strive for as being the fulfillment of God's purpose for us. In this way one is imitating the lives of the first Christians at Jerusalem who are described in the Acts of the Apostles as having one heart and one soul and owning everything in common (Acts 4:32).

THEIR DAY-TO-DAY PRACTICE OF FRIENDSHIP

But if this was the ideal of friendship, an ideal which is as relevant for us today as it was to friends in the fourth century, what about the practicalities of friendship? The writers in antiquity had provided advice about the day-to-day practice of friendship—the need for loyalty, the advisability of limiting the number of friends you had, the need to demonstrate your affection in practical terms, the ways of telling a flatterer from a true friend, and so on. Did the early Christian writers add anything to this or did they speak only in theoretical terms?

In fact, what is perhaps the most practical advice for Christians comes from a source that may seem an unlikely one, namely from those who withdrew from society into remote areas, particularly into the desert of Egypt, to a life of solitude or partial solitude. This allowed them to focus their attention on God in a more concentrated manner than was possible amid the distractions of a secular, urban lifestyle. These people, mostly men but also some women, withdrew to a life of prayer, manual work, and (when they came into contact with others) obedience and humility.

We learn of the ideas of these desert dwellers from such sources as the letters of St. Antony, probably the first and certainly the most famous of those who went out into the desert from the mid-third century onwards, and from the accounts of the lives of desert monks by those who lived with them or visited them. These accounts were hugely popular at the time and had a great influence on the development of the monastic life in the next few centuries. And today they can provide us with a wonderful example of lives led in extreme humility, in a moving combination of innocence and wisdom.

So what rules and practices regarding friendship did they propose? There was, firstly, an understanding that the formation of close relationships was beneficial for spiritual development. Such relationships offered the opportunity to lay down one's life for one's friend in accordance with Christ's commandment (John 15:13). The desert dwellers seem to have interpreted this as implying the necessity for humility, obedience, and renunciation of one's own will. How far they took these challenges is exemplified by the story of the two men

who shared the same cell and the few belongings they had. One day one of them suggested they should try having an argument as that is what other people do, but his friend admitted that he did not know how to have an argument. So the first one said, "Look, I'll put this brick between us and say, 'It's mine,' and you say, 'No, it's not yours, it's mine,' and

in that way we will start an argument." But when they had put the brick down and the one said, "It's mine," and the other duly responded, "No, it's mine," the first one said, "Well, if it's yours, take it," and that was the end of their argument: their perfect humility and self-sacrifice had completely undermined the potential quarrel which would have led to dissension and ill-feeling.³

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One way the desert fathers differed in their advice about friendship from both non-Christians and other Christians was that they advised against criticizing your friend or making any judgment on his or her behavior. Whereas those who lived in any kind of community or society felt that criticism, if given in a gentle way, was a good thing and something one

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friend should gladly accept from another for his own good, the desert fathers believed strongly in the importance of humility which meant dwelling on one's own faults and sins. Whether or not one thinks that criticism is necessary in friendship, the desert fathers were surely right in seeing that if one is strongly aware of one's own faults, one is far less likely to criticize oth-

ers, a view echoed in the words of Jesus: "first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Matthew 7:5).

If we gain some idea of their understanding of friendship from the stories of the lives and sayings of many of the desert fathers, the most coherent account of the ideal of spiritual friendship between two persons is found in a work called *The Conferences* (meaning conversations or discussions) by John Cassian, written at the beginning of the fifth century. In Book 16 of this work one of the desert fathers, called Joseph, tells the young Cassian and his friend Germanus, who are spending some time in the desert visiting those who live there in order to learn from them, what he believes is necessary for the best kind of friendship to work. Joseph admits that there are different types of friendship – this is something that everyone seemed to agree on and it is perhaps something that might be helpful to us when we think about the different kinds of friendship we experience. If we can perceive the differences we may more easily recognize if any of our friendships are truly spiritual and therefore will be more likely to last but will also need more commitment and effort. While friendliness and love of neighbor are good things in their own right, there is also something good and special about intense friendship with only a few: after all, did not Christ have a special affection for John the disciple? The only friendship, says Joseph, that is likely to last (for he is realistic enough to admit that friendships do sometimes break down) is one that is not based on gratitude for favors received or on shared pleasure, but one in which both friends are equally matched in good-

ness and the striving for goodness. In order to progress in virtue, both friends must work hard at humility and selflessness, leading to a state of spiritual purification. Perfect friendship, it is believed, can only be experienced by a person who has attained the purity of heart necessary to reach the Kingdom of God.⁴ This is a tough challenge in pursuit of a high ideal.

But Joseph does not just define the challenge and describe the reward. The desert fathers were men of great psychological perceptiveness and deep practical wisdom and Joseph is no exception, for he provides those who want to experience the best type of friendship with six rules to help them—rules that can in fact help us more generally in our relationships with others and indeed in dealing with many of the difficulties we confront in our lives.

The first step along the road is to reject all the things of this world and to give priority to our love for our friend. The second step is for the friends to restrain their own wills: neither friend must think that he knows better than the other. The third step is for them to become convinced that nothing—not even things that seem necessary and useful—is as valuable as love and peace. The fourth step is not to allow oneself to become angry. The fifth step is for the friend to try to get rid of any resentment he feels his friend is harboring against him. The final step is for the friends to live as if each day was their last, for such an attitude puts all transitory feelings and minor irritations into perspective.

Joseph insists that the main reasons for damage to friendships are anger and the inability to give up one's own wishes; these rules direct us to keep things in perspective and to bear in mind what is truly important, namely the love in which we are a part but which goes beyond our individual selves. If friends can maintain love by working hard at cultivating a spirit of humility, patience, and harmony of wills in all matters, by means of calm discussion and a shared desire for truth, they will show themselves obedient to St. Paul's words in Philippians 2:1-4: "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

THEIR ENCOURAGEMENT OF FRIENDS

What we see from this is that to the early Christians friendship was not merely companionship, though this could be the starting point for something better. Nor was it something cozy or sentimental—the view of friendship that lies behind much of what we might find in modern gift shops, for example. For the greatest benefits to be derived from friendship they believed that one needed to follow certain rules, perform certain duties, all in a spirit of profound love for the other person and for God.

This would often involve frequent writing of letters, for many of these people were living far from the friends they had perhaps made while studying together in one of the academic centers such as Rome, Athens, or Carthage; their work or their spiritual goals might subsequently take them anywhere within the Roman empire. If this sounds not too different from the modern experience of work in far-flung places, and family members and friends separated by long distances, the comparison with the fourth-century experience should make us grateful for modern conveniences such as a postal service and e-mail. The early Christians, writing letters of encouragement and affection and theological discussion, would have to wait for someone who happened to be traveling to the area where the friend lived to carry the letter; and even when such a person was found, he might lose the letter on the way or change his travel plans, and the letter would arrive very late or even not at all. Augustine, living in North Africa, sent a letter to Jerome in Bethlehem, but the letter went via Rome and was read by others before a copy of it finally reached Bethlehem after several years. Jerome was furious, and it took several more years for him to calm down and write a friendly letter to Augustine.⁵ But if we would not wish to communicate with our friends in similar circumstances, there is perhaps one feature of their communication that we might consider worth imitating and that is their desire to communicate something worthwhile—at least (if the messenger was leaving unexpectedly early and one only had time to scribble down a few lines as a message) a sincere expression of affection and encouragement, but at best something to help one's friend in his or her spiritual development.

What then is the difference between the friendly and friendship? Certainly friendliness, like friendship, is based on benevolence and necessitates the rejection of all that involves the denigration of others, or contempt for them, or violence against them.⁶ But friendliness, if it does not develop into friendship, remains a superficial kind of human solidarity. If, however, friendliness is open to God's grace and does develop into friendship, it will be transformed into a relationship of continuity, stability, and trust. It will also be distinguished by the fact that it is a mutual relationship, and I suspect that this is a key feature of the special value of friendship, a feature that enriches the relationship immeasurably, miraculously.

But to reach that point it may be helpful for us to see that we must not only be open to the workings of God's grace but that we should try to live our lives according to certain demanding rules. We must be active in our concern for our friend: this does not mean being a busybody, but being constantly alert to one's friends' deepest needs. The success of the friendship will be proved by the happiness and love emanating from the friends and this will inevitably have a positive impact on the world around them. The friendship will add another link to the chain of love, the existence of which is so important for a world in which lack of trust, contempt, and dissension always threaten to dominate our lives and our societies. Such

a friendship will be seen to resemble the relationship described by Cassian fifteen hundred years ago: “This is the true and indissoluble love that grows by the combined perfection and virtue of the friends, linked by the most ardent companionship for the sake of Christ’s love.”⁷

NOTES

1 Paul J. Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 25.

2 Carolinne White, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 23. The idea of a third element uniting the friends is found also in Christian theology: one thinks of the opening of Aelred of Rievaulx’s *Spiritual Friendship*, where Aelred addresses his friend, “Here we are, you and I, and I hope that between us Christ is a third.”

3 *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, translated by Benedicta Ward (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 182.

4 John Cassian, *The Conferences*, translated by Boniface Ramsey (Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1997), 1.4.3.

5 *The Correspondence (394-419) between Jerome and Augustine of Hippo*, translated by Carolinne White (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990).

6 Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., *What Is the Point of Being a Christian?* (London: Burns and Oates, 2005), 158.

7 Cassian, *The Conferences*, 16.3.2.



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