

# Friends of Christ, Friends in Christ

BY PHILIP COUTURE

“What relationship can compare to Christ’s friendship? How many people in our lives have died for us? How many have sacrificed significantly for us? Because of Jesus, we all have at least one such person in our lives. He is the standard for all true friendship.”



**W**HO AM I, REALLY? What makes me who I am? And how much do other people affect who I become? These perennial questions reflect the fact that we are deeply affected by things around us, especially by other people. In some ways, our surroundings helped make us better people, and in other ways, worse. Whether for better or worse, we can wonder who we would be without these influences in our life. It seems hard to argue against how impactful our relationships are, and it raises the question of just how much our relationships define us.

## Our Image and Likeness

The search for our own identity goes hand-in-hand with who God is. The Trinity is “the source of all other mysteries, the light



that enlightens them,” which includes our own mystery (CCC 234). However, the Trinity is anything but easy to understand, and attempts to resolve the mystery neatly have resulted in numerous heresies in the Church’s history. How can a God

whose identity is beyond human understanding or expression help us understand ourselves? How can the unfathomable essence of God help us fathom who we are?

As mysterious as the Trinity is, the Church’s dogma makes one thing clear: our triune God is a relational God. When two things are in relationship with each other, it means that their existence and identities are intertwined. In this sense, none of the persons of the Trinity can be separated from the others (see CCC 255). The Father cannot be apart from the Son, nor the Son apart from the Father, nor the Holy Spirit apart from either.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, a relationship implies distinguishability; it is not possible to say something is unique if there are no differences to tell it apart from something else. The persons of the Trinity are essentially united, but each is distinguished by their relation to each other (see CCC 254–55). The Father is who he is because of the Son, and vice versa. The Holy Spirit is who he is because he is the Spirit of the Father and the Son.<sup>2</sup> To put this more simply, the relationship each person of the Trinity has to the others is both unitive and

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1 Eleventh Council of Toledo, in *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, ed. J. Dupuis (New York: Alba House, 1982), 102–6, no. 316.

2 Ibid., no. 311.

distinctive: their relationships simultaneously describe their union and their distinction.

Created in God's image and likeness, human persons bear a certain similarity to the relationality of the divine persons.<sup>3</sup> Being distinct persons, we are nonetheless made for unity. John Paul II observes that all human reality can be understood through the lens of relationship. In fact, everything in our lives is composed of four fundamental relationships: with God, with oneself, with others, and with the rest of creation.<sup>4</sup> Sin is ruptured relationship, and reconciliation is its repair. The first sin in Eden is a loss of friendship, and it is echoed in all human strife and injustice.<sup>5</sup> Salvation history, on the other hand, "is the wonderful history of a reconciliation," a restoration of friendship.<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding the immense difference between the divine persons and us, we are also constituted by relationships.

### **It Is Not Good for Man to Be Alone**

It is startling to recognize how much others form us into who we are. Our very lives depend on two people coming together for our sake. If left to fend for ourselves, we will learn from any relationship available to us. The radicality of this truth is seen with so-called "feral children," real-life cases of children who were separated from their parents at an extremely young age and somehow survived. Coexisting with animals, their behaviors bear an uncanny resemblance to the creatures with which they related. Fictional representations of these cases abound, like *The Jungle Book* or *Tarzan*, but the real stories are far more tragic. Most of the time, these children are never able to learn human language or integrate into society. Though they are human by birth, they never learned how to be human. It is relationships, not instincts, that

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3 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 24.

4 John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, no. 4.

5 Ibid., nos. 14–15.

6 Ibid., no. 4.

help us become persons. We need other people to become who we are.

Even so, it seems we do not have much direction in how to be with other people. Mere connectivity is not sufficient to remedy our relational needs. Disenchanted with fallen humanity, some have chosen to abandon society altogether and live in the wild. However, our relational constitutions follow us everywhere, even if nobody else is around. Perhaps Christopher McCandless said it best in some of his last recorded words before dying alone in the Alaskan wilderness: “HAPPINESS [IS] ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED.”<sup>7</sup>

Others have this loneliness thrust upon them in the wilderness of the concrete jungle, often leading to comparable consequences. In the first year of Christ in the City’s relational ministry to the homeless, the missionaries were directed to a man who had slept under a tree for three weeks. Abandoned to his state, he did not move even to go to the bathroom, leading him to urinate and defecate in his pants. Despite his positioning within

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the crowds and traffic of downtown Denver, Steve had no relationships to share his life. If it were not for the missionaries,

he would have literally died from loneliness, and even the connectivity of the big city was not enough to cure his poverty of relationships. We are clearly in need of relationships, but not just any relationship.

## I Have Called You Friends

God is also not content with just any way of relating with us. The entire Old Testament reveals God’s initiative to renew a relationship with us. Unwilling to allow us to remain as enemies, he unfolds a plan to restore what was ruptured. But it is not

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<sup>7</sup> Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), 189.

enough to simply bring us into his household. As Christ said to his apostles, “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (Jn 15:15). God does not just want to relate to us as his servants. He wants to share his life with us. He wants to share the intimacies of the Trinity with us (see Jn 16–17).

The importance of benevolent relationships, of true friends, is one that has been recognized across cultures since before Christ’s coming. Aristotle describes friendship as a treasure worth living for despite any poverty. He observes that friendship seems to hold society together and inform all other relationships, even unequal ones.<sup>8</sup> However, he is realistic in recognizing that friendship is only possible if some commonality unites them.<sup>9</sup>

The possibility of friendship with God would be unfathomable by Aristotle’s definition. If God is infinite, then there is an infinite distance between us and him. There is simply too much inequality to be bridged.<sup>10</sup> It is a testament to the incomprehensibility of God’s love that the Son relinquished equality with God not just to become like us but become a servant (see Phil 2:6–8; Mt 20:28). He shares our every experience except for sin, since that would be a rupture of friendship (see Heb 2:17–18; 4:15). By taking on our human nature, we are able to take on his divine nature (see 2 Pet 1:3–4). Through his Incarnation, death, and Resurrection, Jesus made himself the best friend we could ever imagine.

Perhaps this has something to do with Christ’s special identification with those who suffer greater miseries, which reflects the ruptures that persist among humanity. When the poor and afflicted seem inhuman to us, Jesus, who “was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the sons of men” (Is 52:14), recognizes himself in them. When the miseries of a person are invisible to society, he who “was despised and rejected by men . . . as one from whom men hide their faces” (Is 53:3) sees them.

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8 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 8, no. 1.

9 Ibid., nos. 6–8.

10 Ibid., no. 7.

## No Greater Love

What relationship can compare to Christ's friendship? How many people in our lives have died for us? How many have sacrificed significantly for us? Because of Jesus, we all have at least one such person in our lives. He is the standard for all true friendship. He reminds us that with him all things are possible (see Mt 19:26), and without him nothing is possible (see Jn 15:5). Our friends help form us into who we are, but we would continue to exist without them. God, however, is the one relationship without which we cannot exist, even when he is a stranger to us. Put simply, relationship with God is the source of our existence, and his relational essence makes all other relationships possible.

In fact, it is this incomparable friendship with Christ that makes the greatest of friendships possible. Many saints who are the first to recognize the fickleness of humanity are also the most bound to their holy friends. St. Augustine writes with unapologetic affection to a fellow saint, Paulinus. He declares that he is unimpressed by those who are so patient when distant from their dear ones, and even as Augustine grieves his distance from Paulinus, he is consoled to love him so much that it hurts.<sup>11</sup> St. Bernard can relate, as he makes no effort to stoically mourn the death of his brother and best friend. On the contrary, the cries from this passionate monk have the power to make future generations weep for Bernard's loss. "But I do lament the loss of a loyal helper, one whose advice on the things of God was ever reliable. It is Gerard whom I weep for. [. . .] My soul cleaved to his. We were of one mind, and it was this, not blood relationship, that joined us as one."<sup>12</sup> Yet even these pale in comparison to St. Aelred of Rievaulx, whose writings devastate any notion of religious saints being dispassionate and detached friends. Referencing the Scriptures,

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11 Augustine of Hippo, "Letter 27 to Paulinus," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, trans. J.G. Cunningham, ed. Philip Schaff, 1st ser., vol. 1 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1887).

12 Bernard of Clairvaux, sermon 26, "The Blackness of the Bride Compared to the Tents of Kedar; Bernard's Lament for His Brother," V.8-9, in *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, online at <https://ia800702.us.archive.org/11/items/St.BernardOnTheSongOfSongs/StBernardOnTheSongOfSongsall.wps.pdf>.

Aelred asserts that “the one who remains in friendship remains in God, and God in him.”<sup>13</sup> The saints feel deeply their need for relationship, especially for relationships that bear the image and likeness of Christ.

Since Jesus united himself to our condition, we can become friends with anyone. If friendship requires a basic commonality, then communion with Jesus is what makes all friendship possible because he is our “common-union.” This is the foundation for our commission to go “and make disciples of all the nations” (Mt 28:19). Far from being satisfied with the number of our current Christlike friends, the Lord calls us to go find more. Indeed, if the Church’s mission consists of establishing communion through Christ, then we are called to find these friends throughout world.<sup>14</sup>

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*Christ in the City is a nonprofit that offers Catholic formation to college-aged missionaries, who in turn regularly walk the streets of Denver with the mission of befriending and supporting the homeless they encounter. To learn more, visit [christinthecity.org](http://christinthecity.org).*

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13 Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Lawrence C. Braceland, ed. Marsha L. Dutton, Cistercian Fathers 5 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 1:70.

14 John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 26.