

*Friendship with God means loving God for his own sake
and loving everyone else and
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Friendship with God

By Victor B. Brezik

Among our most cherished, satisfying and dependable possessions in life are our friends. Without friends life becomes narrow, bleak, lonely and unfulfilled. With friends, life becomes expansive, enlarged, broadened by the mutual sharing of interests, goals, joys, sorrows, achievements and frustrations. There is nothing like having a friend at hand to be helpful in our need or to whom to be helpful in his need. Friendship provides the most enjoyable form of companionship. It is friendship that opens the door to marriage and keeps the marriage alive. Friendship is heart to heart intimacy. It is a high level of love.

Obviously, friends need to know each other because love follows upon knowledge. I once saw a striking definition that said: "A friend is someone who knows all about you and still loves you." Do your friends really know all about you? Indeed, is there anyone who knows all about you, even better than you know yourself? Of course, you may credit God with knowing all about you. But, after all, God is God and does not strike one as being on the familiar human level of friendship.

Long ago, the noted Greek philosopher, Aristotle, who wrote perceptively on friendship, thought that friendship, since it implies equality, cannot exist between man and God.¹ But since the time of Aristotle, something astounding has happened in history requiring us radically to modify this view. God himself has intervened in the ordinary course of history. The Son of God became incarnate in Christ and Christ has opened our eyes to a new perspective on human relations with God. From the teaching of Christ, we now know that God has raised our human love of him up to his level of a true participation in God's own love of himself as the Supreme Good. Christ disclosed and shared this knowledge with us as a friend reveals and shares intimate secrets with a friend. As recorded in Sacred Scripture, he said: "I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father."² By calling us His friends, Christ has placed us on a common level of intimate relationship with God the Father. How are we to understand this mysterious disclosure?

Since friendship is a form of love, there must be a special kind of love which defines our friendship with God. In Catholic theology this love is called charity (*caritas*). Knowing this led me to search out the treatise on charity in the *Summa of Theology* of St. Thomas Aquinas. I was immediately rewarded.³ The very first article in the first question dealing

with charity is entitled: “Whether Charity is Friendship?”



How does St. Thomas go about answering this question? He explains first, following Aristotle, the conditions necessary for friendship and then shows that these conditions are fulfilled by charity.

Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*⁴ had pointed out that not every love qualifies as friendship, only that love characterized as benevolent love. Benevolent love is the love by which we love someone so as to wish good to him. Love is always directed to some good, that is, either to a true or an apparent good. If, however, we do not wish good to the other but wish the other’s good for ourselves, we are loving, as it were, in a circle, so that our love is actually a love of self. This kind of love, which in scholastic language is called love of concupiscence, is quite common in our experience and is exemplified in our love of apple pie, the automobile, and such like things. St. Thomas borrows the examples of wine and a horse from Aristotle and mentions how absurd it would be to speak of having friendship for wine or for a horse.

Still, this kind of love does serve as the form of some common friendships. Aristotle distinguished three forms of friendship directed respectively to three kinds of good.⁵ Pleasurable friendship is directed toward the delightful or pleasant good; useful friendship is directed toward the useful good; virtuous friendship is directed toward the virtuous or noble good. Pleasurable friendship, prevalent among the young, and useful friendship, prevalent among the old, do not meet the full requirement of friendship, since they are both forms of love which returns or is bent back to the lover. In the one case, friends enjoy each other; in the other case, friends use each other. In reality this is self-love. Only virtuous friendship, based upon virtue, which is a relatively stable quality, is friendship in the truest sense, because it is a form of benevolent love, a love of the other for the other’s sake.

A man once revealed to me that he had an infatuating love for a certain woman and would do anything in his power for her. I inquired how the woman was responding to his love for her. He replied: “Oh, she knows nothing about it.” Although the man’s love may have been an authentic benevolent love, the relationship between them was not friendship. For friendship, the benevolent love must be mutual. Each of the friends must love the other with a benevolent love. In the Latin of St. Thomas: *amicus est amico amicus*. Reciprocity is an essential quality of the love of friendship and usually manifests itself by some expression of beneficence. In a courtship, for instance, flowers or chocolates are not unusual or perhaps some sort of mutual helps and services.

Finally, the mutual love of benevolence in friendship must have its foundation in something possessed in common among friends. St. Thomas speaks of some sort of communication as the basis—*fundatur super aliqua communicatione*. What is the nature

of this communication? Does it consist in the active exchange of gifts or is the exchange of gifts a consequence of the recognition of a prior existing good or perfection common to the friends? Aristotle quotes the adage: “birds of a feather flock together.” Certainly friends are drawn together by the community of human nature they possess and come to live together in various social groupings. Yet all persons who by reason of circumstance live together do not by the mere fact of their common human nature always love one another. Not infrequently their relations are the opposite.

The common possession of human nature, although a prerequisite, is not an adequate explanation of the mutual attraction and love of two individual human beings. Why do they come to love each other? What is the radical reason for their reciprocal gravitation? I am thinking here of St. Augustine’s expression: my love is my weight – *amor meus pondus meum*.⁶ Long-standing friends may never have analyzed the source of their mutual allurements. Looking for the metaphysical source of love. St. Thomas proposes three causes: the *good* as the object of love and its cognate *beauty*; knowledge of the good; and *likeness* or *similitude* in form. The latter, he says, is properly speaking the cause of love.⁷

The similitude by which two persons actually possess the same perfection or quality, such as virtue, is the kind of similitude or likeness which is the cause of the love of benevolence or friendship. The two persons are similar in that they are, as it were, one in their possession of that form. The word form (*forma*) has a variety of applications in the vocabulary of St. Thomas but in general it bears the meaning of a principle that gives actual determination to something, as whiteness, for instance, determines a thing to be white. In the context of love, it must be understood as denoting a wide range of instances. When two persons discover having this likeness or sameness of form, the affections of one, St. Thomas says, tend to the other, as being one with the other, and the one wishes good to the other as to himself.⁸

We are now in a position to say that friendship is a mutual or reciprocal love of benevolence, known to the two parties, and based upon some perfection or quality possessed in common between them.

The main question is: can such a relation of friendship exist between man and God? What does man have in common with God as the foundation of such a relation? Man’s human nature itself is not held in common with God. Something above man’s nature must be communicated by God himself to provide a common ground for man’s friendship with him. St. Thomas explains that there is something common to man and God in that God communicates to us his Beatitude or Happiness. This participation in God’s Beatitude forms the basis of our friendship with him, and the love that unites us with God in friendship is the love that is charity. For this reason, St. Thomas affirms that charity is a certain friendship of man with God—*caritas amicitia quaedam est hominis ad Deum*. Charity fulfills all the conditions of such a true friendship. In support, St. Thomas quotes St. Paul: “God is faithful, and by him you were called to fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”⁹

St. Thomas's conclusion thus affirmatively answers the question asked in the beginning, "Whether Charity is Friendship," but not without need of some further clarifications. For instance, did not Aristotle say, "there is nothing so characteristic of friends as living together?"¹⁰ But this does not square with our relationship with God. In explanation, there is need to distinguish two phases or two sides of man's life, since his nature itself is a composite of body and soul. According to the sensible and corporeal side of his nature man has an outward or exterior life and in this regard there is no communication or fellowship between us and God or for that matter with the angels. On the mental side of his nature, however, man has a life that is spiritual, since his soul is a spiritual principle, and according to this second side of life there is fellowship between us and with God and the angels. In our present earthly state of existence this fellowship on the spiritual and mental side of life is imperfect. Sacred Scripture indicated this when it says, "our conversation is in heaven."¹¹ At present, our spiritual conversation with God is based on our life of grace and is carried on in prayer through acts of faith, hope and charity. But this same fellowship which is now through faith will be made perfect in the glory of heaven when we enter the immediate presence of God.¹² As Sacred Scripture also says, "his servants will worship him. They will look upon his face."¹³ It follows that charity, too, which is imperfect here, will be perfected in heaven.

Something else also calls for clarification. Friendship, as already stated, requires a return of love. St. Thomas refers to a *redamatio*, a loving back in response. How does this agree with charity's demand to love even one's enemies? In St. Matthew we read: "But I say to you, love your enemies."¹⁴ It is characteristic of enemies to hate rather than return one's love of them. How then can charity be friendship?

St. Thomas replies so clearly and succinctly to this difficulty that I shall repeat his words in full. "Friendship," he says (Reply to Objection 2), "extends to a person in two ways: first in respect of himself, and in this way friendship never extends but to one's friends; secondly, it extends to someone in respect of another, as, when a man has friendship for a certain person, for his sake he loves all belonging to him, be they children, servants, or connected with him in any way. Indeed, so much do we love our friends, that for their sake we love all who belong to them, even if they hurt or hate us; so that, in this way, the friendship of charity extends even to our enemies, whom we love out of charity in relation with God, to whom the friendship of charity is chiefly directed."¹⁵

In the same way the friendship of charity embraces also sinners whom we love for God's sake as God's creatures called to the sharing of the Divine Beatitude.

By this principle of loving not only a friend but also whatever pertains to him, we understand why charity obliges us to be disposed in our hearts to love all human beings, if not even other animate and inanimate beings comprising the environment, not that the latter can be loved as friends, since they lack rationality, but that as creatures they belong to God Whom we love as a friend, and that as good things of earth their preservation is desirable for man's use and for the honor of God.¹⁶

Friendship with God means loving God for his sake and loving everyone else and everything else with this ultimate motive. To enemies and to sinners charity demands that we still wish them the sharing of God's Happiness. Even the love of ourselves, which we must never abdicate, should be such that we love ourselves in and for God. This is implied in the totality that characterizes the commandment of love.

Yet it is good to remember the fact of life that we may be and occasionally are deceived in the true object of our love, preferring limited and temporal goods to the divine Source of all good. Even when we turn to the Source of all good in prayer, our attitude toward God may easily and unwarily be marred by traces of self-love. Indeed, our friendship with God can deteriorate to the level of the less worthy friendships of pleasure and utility. In other words, we may come to love God primarily for what he can give us or what we can get from him, not for his own sake. This only proves that it costs an effort to maintain our relations with God on the highest level of charity and of true friendship and consciously esteem God as our best friend.

Undoubtedly, this doctrine of friendship with God can deepen our spiritual life in that it brings God, as it were, closer to us and places us in intimate association with Him. As friends normally wish to spend time together, we are prompted by our charity and friendship to commune more frequently with God through affective prayer and meditation and thus grow in our fellowship with the Trinity of Divine Persons in anticipation of the perfect life of heavenly union which consists in sharing the Divine Beatitude promised by Christ and merited for us on the cross.



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- 1 *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII. 4. 1159 a 5
- 2 John 15:15
- 3 *ST. II-II. q. 23. a. 1*
- 4 VIII. 2. 1156 a 5
- 5 *Op. cit.* VIII. 5. 1157 a 20
- 6 *Confessions* XIII. 9
- 7 *ST. I-II. Q. 27. a. 3*
- 8 Cf. *ibid.*
- 9 1 Cor. 1:9.
- 10 *Op. cit.* VIII. 5. 1157 a 20
- 11 Phil. 3:20.
- 12 Cf. *ST. I-II. 1, 65. a 5.* The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes three references to man's friendship with Christ and fourteen to man's friendship with God. Six references are to man's friendship with God before the fall, four to man's restoration to friendship after the fall, and one to his friendship with God in heaven.
- 13 Rev. 22: 3,4
- 14 5:44
- 15 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Literally Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Vol. II., Benzinger Brothers, Inc., 1947, pp. 1269, 1270.
- 16 Cf. *ST. II-II. q. 25. a. 3*
- 17 (Copyist's note.) I've taken the liberty of correct ing a few typos in the printed HPR article.