FIRST THINGS

Good Friends and Great Desires

A great many friends in the Lord have been busy this summer eliciting great desires. Jesuit historians from everywhere gathered for The Fourth Colloquium at Chantilly to listen to papers precisely on the theme of "Friends in the Lord" (the story of great desires in one of them comes up a few paragraphs further along). The Thirteenth General Assembly of Christian Life Communities met in Brazil to set world CLC on fire with a common mission. The Dorotheas and the Sisters of Notre Dame held general chapters full of holy hopes. And while electing their new superior general, the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus asked their members to make this far-reaching commitment: "We believe that our growing desire to become more truly a Society with one heart and soul is part of a huge yearning for wholeness, connectedness, and right relationships which is moving people everywhere in the world today and is the work of the Spirit" (Twenty-Fourth General Chapter, 1998, Commitments).

All of these labors raise the point that today's world and everyone in it is, indeed, awash in huge yearnings. The friends in the Lord have been working where two realities coincide: personal desire and the influence of others. In fact, they are clearly living an experience which is as hard to describe as it is sure: Desire is the influence of others. Thinking about this may not be as much fun as reading a chapter of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. But it may prove more fruitful at a time when we talk a lot about desire and discernment. And at least a few ideas loom bright out of the murk.

Desire as the influence of others. To begin with, unlike other vertebrates who come stamped with many instincts, humans are born with just two: to ingest and to communicate. We suckle and we screech. In later life, we want many more things. Some things, we want in common with all humans: food, shelter, safety, belonging, and love would be on most anthropologists' lists. Other things, we seem to want uniquely: personal vocation would have to top anyone's list. But everything that we want, we have learned to want from others, who teach, show, or lead us to want. Our personal desires do indeed rise under the influence of others.

Those serious about their interior lives may find this dictum a bit absolute. For East and West, North and South, spiritual guides have been focusing on "authentic desires," which they usually describe as desires that rise solely from the individual self. They have

been making a necessary point but not all the necessary points. For it is reasonable to call desire truly individual only as long as it is understood that the *person* who desires can live only in community--where desire is learned.

The case is fairly clear in everyday life. The infant who at first will have nothing to do with carrots or spinach will, after some training and with luck, come to yearn for them. Any teenager suffers keen personal desires--which are always just what all the teenagers in the vicinity desire. An accident? Not likely. And then there is advertising. In Argentina, on Taiwan, and in Italy, the green target in a ring of red zooms into focus proclaiming *Lucky Strike*. It seduces the young and the foolish into smoking cigarettes. Other advertising lures men into cars massively overpowered and women into clothing massively overpriced. What makes advertising work?

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The old-time approach of advertising con-sisted in teaching people the excellence of a product: the best, the completest, the finest, whatever. The focus was on the product. Beginning around the middle of this century, the new approach began teaching people their "needs." The focus switched to the consumer. The argument has gone this way: You can be better than you are if you use this product. You ought to be more than you are, which you will be if only you would use this product. You really are a nothing in your world unless you have one of these or some of those. So, finally: "Be everything you can be"--wear Brand X, with the name showing. "Get a life--drink Brand Q"--which all gorgeous people drink. "More than a promise--this is what you ARE!" We jeer at advertising. We loathe and despise it. And it works. The whole world now wants garishly decorated white running shoes, color television, a gold chain, a car. We *want* these things; these are our desires. It works because desire is the influence of others.

To say that people have been not preoccupied about this difficult truth is hardly an overstatement. Even when they are made aware of it, most ignore it. They prefer to live the illusion--one of modern indi-vidualism's less sensible illusions--that their personal desires are completely individual. But they betray their hidden belief by what they do. Such people regularly wear, eat, drive, sit in, watch, and enjoy the same things as everyone else. Their tastes are conventional. Their moral judgments are conventional. Their lives are conventional. So they just do what others do? No; it goes deeper than that: they desire what everyone else desires.

friends help one another desire the same mission in the Lord

Friends and Desires. Perhaps in some measure, we all do desire, and must desire, what others desire. But the influence of friends makes a special case. This influence is the source of energy in clubs and societies and even in old-time political parties. The

influence of friends drives the "apostolate of spiritual conversation," too, unless it has turned into some vague transcendental chatter. We open ourselves to friends, not only to invite them to share our yearnings, but also to catch fire inwardly in accord with the love between us. Consider that Jesuits all around the globe now want to open their ministries to enculturation, ecumenism, and empowerment for justice. How did that happen? Consider that during this year, the Ignatian Congregations worked through processes before, during, and after their general chapters which they geared precisely to desiring differently than in the past. Consider--perhaps most strikingly this summer--that the Christian Life Communities have set out to help one another desire the same common mission in the Lord.

At this point, it may be possible to illuminate a couple of ideas out of this murk: one theological and one in ignatian spirituality. Theologically, the notion that desire is the influence of others throws a sharp light on the social structures of sin and how they work. Little children are habituated to shallow consumerism shortly after they have learned to like carrots, a fact CLC parents ruefully noted. The young are taught to want drugs. Business partners learn the value of shortcuts. The married learn to want a dubious independence. The developed world wants to live young until we die at 95. In all of this, the structures of sin emerge concrete and clear. They are not merely objective and they are not merely subjective. They are intersubjective. Most primitively of all, they reside in desires abroad in the SHCJ's "huge yearning . . . moving people everywhere in the world." In very large measure, this huge yearning is a kind of radioactivity of desire--mindless, relentless, disordered, and disordering. And in even larger measure, Christians confidently believe, it is the work of the Spirit.

the structures of sin are intersubjective

From this rises another clarity, this one in spirituality. The notion that desire is the influence of others throws a sharp light on experiences of Two Standards. Where do your desires come from? From radioactive advertisement, convention, conformity? If so, do please remember the Ten Commandments before it is too late. Do your desires come more directly from friends in the Lord? Even directly from the Lord Himself? If so, do please expect to be astonished at what you come authentically to desire--a simple life of service, love of God, a just world, to live and die with holy friends.

You may find all of this less than convincing. Well, take as a hypothesis that the influence of others drives our everyday life. We want toothpaste, not powder. We want color television, not black-and-white, or much less, God forbid, silence. We want refrigerators for food, electricity for phone and television. We want some control over our political and social lives, and an end to social violence. So much, our world wants every day. But the influence of others reaches well past the everyday. It reaches intimately into our choosing a way of life.

Ignatian history offers a wonderfully pertinent illustration to test out the hypothesis. Ignatius desired to live in poverty with companions, as Jesus and the first apostles lived, and he wanted to do it in Jerusalem for easily guessed though unavowed purposes, or else go to Rome. He befriended Pierre Favre, Francis Xavier, and the others at the university in Paris. Over several years, they shared room and board and studies and they swapped spiritual experiences. Then, just before they all left Paris, Ignatius guided each of them through his *Spiritual Exercises*. Each companion came to his own election during his month, free of any influence from the man who wrote Annotation 15.

Each kept his election secret for a time (so as not to influence the desiring of the rest?). Then, perhaps on one of the university's usual Thursday afternoons alfresco, each told what he had decided. The first announced that he had decided to live in poverty in an evangelical group and to go to Jerusalem for easily guessed though unavowed purposes, or else go to Rome. The second announced that he had decided to live in poverty in an evangelical group and to go to Jerusalem . . . or else go to Rome. And so on. Each told the same secret. Had a miracle of grace brought them each to the same election? Perhaps it had. But before betting on a miracle, it would be wise to note that Ignatius had been working on them for months and even years. By all their accounts, he had become their master. As do all masters', his desires shaped the desires of his pupils. And then those desires became truly and authentically the lifelong personal desires of each pupil, each friend in the Lord.

the influence of others reaches well past the everyday

This same kind of story lies at the foundation of many other congregations. Take the Sisters of Notre Dame of Coesfeld. At their beginning are two friends, Aldegonda Wolbring who became Mary Aloysia and Lisette Kühling who became Mary Ignatia. These two women of Münsterland in Germany had been trained as school teachers in the methods of the extraordinarily original Bernard Overberg, who is credited with inventing the teacher training schools. He clearly influenced his students' desires to teach the whole person. To their delighted surprise, these two women found that they shared a tremendous desire to be of service to the disadvantaged children of that time--specifically, young disadvantaged girls. Candor requires that they be named street children. The two expected to do this simply and unobtrusively in a parish school in Coesfeld. But the young associate pastor, Theodor Elting, a man of prayer, found himself convinced that they should join a religion congregation. His desire became their desire. The diocesan bishop had a tremendous desire to re-establish women's congregations in an area which had abolished them. All of these desires became the desires of Aldegonda Wolbring and Lisette Kühling, but none of them obliterated the desire they originally elicited in each other: "Although the congregation, as circumstances make it necessary, establishes schools for the instruction of girls of every class, still it concerns itself chiefly with the education of poor girls."

These two stories of desiring are replicated at the foundations of every ignatian congregation. But the aura of the holy is so strong around such events that we need to squint to see three mundane facts, illustrated here from the first story but plainly true of all the others.

First, they shared. The first companions of Ignatius shaped their hearts' desire slowly through hours and hours of what we now call sharing. They talked and talked and talked. They made this summers' meetings seem brief, indeed. They shared more than talk, it is important to notice: Ignatius shared the money he gathered in Flanders. Xavier shared his grasp of philosophy. Favre shared his theological learning. On Thursday afternoons, they went alfresco and shared what they had to eat. On Sunday mornings, they went together to the Carthusians to share spiritual conversation and worship and Communion. When each came to make his decision during the Exercises, he found his authentic desire: to share life with the rest, laboring with Christ to help souls.

the kind of listening that leads to union of hearts...

Then, they listened. Their long spiritual conversation demanded long listening. This is perfectly obvious. What may be a little less obvious is that this "listening" requires intense activity. More than that: as Franz Meures shows at considerable depth later in these pages, the kind of listening that leads to union of hearts (that is, a sharing of desires) requires a matured affectivity. The point is worth emphasizing even if it may seem obvious, because today people do not easily distinguish hearing and listening. The words used do not much matter. The European languages say vividly of those who hear but do not listen that things go in one ear and out the other. However it is said, the fact is that competent and careful listening is rare enough. People pay serious money to be listened to carefully by competent therapists with special training.

True and wise friendship both creates this listening to one another and is created by it. As a competency, the listening of friends requires training--the training first of all that is sketched in Annotation 1. As a care, the listening of friends surely requires the grace of the Holy Spirit--precisely the kind of care sketched in paragraph [22] of *Exercises*. There, we read that friendship puts a special order into hearing and listening, the kind of listening that "every good Christian" is ready to offer another. The paragraph addresses what we hear and what we choose to listen to. It was and remains extraordinarily radical. And friendship is the driving force of this Christian listening, as the paragraph states explicitly: we listen competently and carefully, "moved by love."

... requires a matured affectivity

Finally, they decided together. To pull one last clarity out of this historical dimness, the seven friends in the Lord unanimously made a life-decision. Later on in Rome, joined by three others, they would work to reach further important juridical decisions

unanimously. They found out that they could not keep up the unanimity. They had to turn to deciding by majority vote. This turn to the vote is not without interest to the friends in the Lord who gather all the time to reach decisions. Those who gathered this summer made serious decisions. Not always neatly and not always with the tranquility that many spiritual directors like to call the "peace of confirmation." Their confirmation has been, rather, an intimate share in fresh desiring to go back home to do what they decided to do. Peaceful, perhaps, but restless, too.

Discernment means working as friends. The ignatian groups called their meeting processes "ignatian discernment." In doing so, they cheerfully ignored the unfortunate current insistence that ignatian discernment must be according to the movement of spirits. This, they clearly did not believe. On the contrary, they clearly believed that of the three ways to come to choice noted by Master Ignatius, the first way (a decision simply given) and the third way (a decision hammered out in thoughtful reflection) are as valid as the second way (by movement of spirits), both apart from Exercises and during them. Moreover, they had scheduled beforehand processes with definite timeframes for these communal discernments.

Some of us talk today about communal discernment as though it were an esoteric process--merely foreshadowed in past centuries by founding members the way parchment maps vaguely indicated the sea-lanes on the round globe--a labor as subtle as photographing gamma rays or reaching nirvana. Communal discernment is no such thing. What the companions did was listen to each other, wholeheartedly, with profound respect and deliberate admiration for each other. They were exercising one of the finest of their "gifts from above": their holy and deeply human friendship. They were all searching for what God wills. And, as each struggled to keep his desiring reasonably orderly, they let themselves learn from one another--each one learning his own desires.

in the end, these friendships are shaping our life desires

Is all this is too cloyingly optimistic? Well, there remains a good deal to figure out about the idea that desire is the influence of others. And we are a long way from anything definitive at all. But if we begin with this as an hypothesis, we may not find it so odd that we attend compulsively to the "problems" and the "difficulties" we have in friendship in our communities. They are no trivial or peripheral matter. After all, in the end, these friendships are shaping our life desires. They carry great promise, and also great risks and dangers. How great? Philippe Lécrivain recounts an instructive if rather grim passage in Jesuit history that illustrates how destructive this friendship in the Lord can become.

A person may choose one set of friends rather than another. But friendship itself heads the list of natural human dynamisms. It is as universal as genetic heritage (which also, in its turn, blesses wonderfully or inflicts grave ills on individuals). As everyone has

a genetic code, everyone is going to have friends. And friends can just as well teach friends how to take drugs, cheat and lie, and inflict violence, as how to play computer games, sing and dance, and read poetry.

Among Friends in the Lord, we teach one another to want to know, love, and follow Jesus of Nazareth who is the Christ. Whatever else all this might mean, it certainly means that we want what he wants. For us, desire is the influence principally of this One Other. Whoever wants to follow him must want, as he wanted, to love all humankind and every person within range. That includes their earthly well-being. As Christ wants to, so do we want to eradicate ethnic, national, generational, and every other inimical division. Christians struggle to achieve it, but universal love is what we want. The desire illumined the general chapters of the Sisters of Notre Dame and the Religious of the Cenacle and the Dorotheas. If anything, it was even more vividly manifest among the colorful CLC teams from sixty nations. The friendship in the Lord was at moments truly astonishing: The Croatians choosing the Slovenians as their sponsors. The African from Lesotho giving a great enthusiastic embrace of peace to the Afrikaner from Capetown. The hours-long conversation among South Korean, Indonesian, Canadian, German, Guatemalan, all patiently waiting while one of them slowly pulled an idea from the thickets of a second or third language. At times the place felt like the Tower of Babel. Mostly, it called Pentecost to mind.

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And at the very end, a pair of young Brazilian members sang a fare-well song, a lithe tango which they had composed:

> Amigo é coisa para se guardar
> Debaixo de sete chaves
> Dentro do coração.

A friend is something to be kept safe inside the heart, locked up with seven keys. Because, the song went on, a friend comes from Christ and leads to Him.

The song was not the mere sweet sentiment of the young. It was Francis Xavier keeping the Companions' signatures near his heart. It was Jean Francis de Chantal on the brutal frontier cherishing her friends back home. It was Sister Mary Aloysia lying ill in at Mount St Mary's, listening to post-Kulturkampf developments back in Germany, with a radiant face. It was, coming at the end of the CLC proceedings, a moving profession of the hope-filled desires that these young had caught from their elders.

In the end, all of this reinforces the hypothesis that desire is the influence of others. Happily this is a truly hopeful hypothesis when those others are faithful friends in the Lord.