

FRIENDS IN THE LORD*

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Friends in the Lord": this is not just another theme among others for a meeting of Jesuits. It touches every aspect of our life - our personal history that we are living or desiring to live now; it brings into play also our life as companions of Jesus, the life of the Company and the witness given to Christ through what we let be seen and heard of our union among ourselves: union of hearts.

I would like to say a few words now: I would rather not make this talk into a homily, nor have it as the final word because I would prefer that the last word of our meeting be left to the Word of God that we will be praying, to the Spirit of God who leads us, each by our own way and together so as to desire even more what we have understood to be the reality forever unfinished - not what one believes to know and possess but that for which we are constantly risking as we respond anew to the call of Christ.

To live as "friends in the Lord", requires *an attitude of spirit and of heart*. And the risk that we run always, when we speak of friendship, is the one of idealism, and of lofty expectation, wished for or hoped for in the relationship among ourselves. Now you recall that "down to earth" side of Ignatius: a realism that led him not to neglect any detail, a sense of the real and of the Incarnation which brought him to seek what is most desirable and what is most universal in what is the most concrete and elementary. It is important not to lose sight of what is *most elementary* in our human and christian experience when we speak of our desire to become ever more "friends in the Lord". It is important first of all to take care of the ground, of the human earth that we are, because it is there that friendship must put down roots and grow.

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- elementary, **this relationship with oneself** - in the context of one's own story, of the person that we are - which leads us to recognize and to accept who we are, to allow the joy of being who we are to be born. There is a sort of consent needed to being oneself - and to being only this person that I am - which is a way of letting ourselves be received by God, by others and accepting of our own story. We are being led to live with greater honesty our relationships with others. A sort of friendship with oneself opens out to a friendship with another.

- elementary, what makes a human life **with others**: we are not allowed to do less than what social life requires - in terms of respect one for another, of justice among ourselves - and to speak of justice, is to desire to give to each what is that person's due -, **to care about the other** which is a way of living a "non withdrawal from another" - and through all that, to know how to withhold a word that might wound, a judgement that catalogues, anything which, under one form or another could disgrace, harm, destroy... or furthermore put on others the burden that ought to be shared.

- Elementary, to live with **esteem for the other** - that is to say to have respect borne by an attitude of spirit and heart which sees, recognizes and knows how to marvel at who the other is - which discovers that what has been given to the other is not to be taken away or slighted: it is the opposite of Cain's attitude toward Abel - rather is ready to be grateful for what has been concealed from us of the greatness of a being and of the ways of God within him.

- elementary, to live **charity towards all our companions**: one cannot, in the name of desiring friendship and living it with other people dispense oneself from the most simple, ordinary, daily charity towards **our nearest neighbour** who is each one of our companions. When we observe at times certain people who have great charity towards others and often have a certain brusqueness towards our own companions, we sense something is not ringing true. Our companions are the first place to exercise the law of love, which is Christ's love. Sometimes you may hear it said: "You are hard on one another." We are then, far from "see how they love one another" which doubtless, they would liked to have been able to say.

Three dimensions of our "friendship in the Lord" seems to me important to underline.

It is a **friendship with reference to Christ**: consequently, it is a friendship in some way "sui generis". Allow me to recall an incident from my life as a Jesuit...I was speaking one day to a Jesuit older than I as a friend and I said, as if putting a seal on something that called for discretion after the confidence I had shared:

"that remains just between the two of us" and he answered: "yes, Francis-Xavier, that remains between the three of us - you, the Lord and me". That day I understood that there is always a third in the relationship of two Jesuits: the Lord. It is **He whom we desire to follow**, personally and with others, when we ask to be received under "the standard of Christ"; it is **He who gives us** to one another. Without Him who unites us we might never have met or known each other; it is **He who unites us** and disperses us because it is He who has called us and brought us together. Our first duty one to another is not to break what God has made, but to affirm and maintain it, and that implies that the vitality of the bond among us and the correctness of our relationship to each one - a relationship engaging both heart and reason - depend upon our relationship with the Lord, the quality of our personal, interior life.

The mission which necessarily separates and disperses us, asks in return from among us this heart of friends without which obedience risks becoming a caricature

*Our friendship in the Lord, like an emblem, has a dimension, an apostolic nature. Certainly, human experience and reflection in our life have shown us how **friendship is one of the most precious of human gifts**. This gift helps us to live the colloquy: Saint Ignatius writes in the Exercises: "to make the colloquy, is essentially to speak as a friend speaks to a friend": how can we speak to the Lord as a friend if we never speak to anyone as a friend? But this colloquy has a characteristic, a mark, and as if from birth, a universality: it is open to everything and to all, even in the strongest friendship between two companions because it is the friendship of companions **who seek what the Lord wants of them** and who **discern** His will - **who look and contemplate** the world in its diversity, its beauty and its interplay like the Vineyard, where they are working together, - who **need the eyes and ears of the other** to live the grace to seek God in everything.*

Friendship between companions – as between Ignatius and Francis-Xavier – is made with the full commitment of two personalities, in their common pursuit to serve the Lord better and help souls, and thus in a radical way to order their friendship for the mission. The mission which necessarily separates and disperses us, asks in return from among us this heart of friends without which obedience risks becoming a caricature. Friendship and obedience in the Company go together and reinforce each other.

In other words, friendship “friends in the Lord” is not an end in itself:

- **it witnesses** to what the Lord has created in us, of the heart that he has formed – and what he has permitted between us. We know the apostolic strength of the witness given by the Jesuits who related one to another during their life. **It is a way of acting..** just as resented eremitics weaken the witness given, the solitary person of a task always risks having only himself to refer to.

- it gives **its strength to the body** of the Society as an evangelical body, working out of the desire to “be in communion among ourselves for a greater fruit” (Deliberation of 1539). It shows that friendship among persons so different is not a Utopia.. and that the radical openness to self and to the other can lead to a reconciled humanity.

*Friendship among ourselves is a **responsibility**.*

Because of the call received, the shared life, the discerned mission, the tasks borne, we are responsible one for another – and it is a **responsibility to be exercised**:

- to be exercised in knowing how to be astonished by the other, daring to point out in one way or another the gifts, talents, qualities that are properly his. The other needs my attention and my word so that he may go through trials, doubts, fears, uncertainties which otherwise at times could cause him to hesitate and his self-confidence to crack.

- to exercise, as if **on a watch: we are a little like “guardians” of our friends**. We have by our foresight and our attention to detect when our companions have need of us – to be there when they are passing through a difficult time or experiencing simply the weight of the day because “one never knows how heavy is the burden that the other is carrying”.

- to exercise, **by never depriving one of our companions of the mercy** that we are ourselves the object. The quality of a person and the quality of loving are shown often in the way in which a friend asks for pardon. Friendship between us is born and grows in proportion to our capacity to ask for pardon and to be pardoned.

In conclusion I would like to express a triple wish:

- let us know how to give thanks for our companions among whom we can live our friendship better: friends are a gift; living in friendship is a grace and friendship changes the heart. Through friendship we avoid the risk of having hearts of stone;

- let us dare to give thanks for all our companion, those here, those in each of our provinces and let us dare to pray that the bonds among us, as companions, may be ever strengthened and deepened, so that communion among us may be broader and be reinforced, the bonds among our provinces may be developed and the Society may respond to whatever the Lord wishes that it be;

- finally, let us believe in friendship, in its strength, its greatness, its beauty and let us be disposed to live it today as this friendship was lived among the first companions: it was a founding inspiration for them. It is so for us today.