For Personal Reflection

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1. Who are the people in my life whom I would describe as friends?
2. In what ways to they befriend me? How do they help me to be the kind of person that God wants me to be?
3. Are there any faults or imperfections in my friends that I need to gently address?
4. Are there any dimensions, echoes or shadows of sin in my friendships?
5. What kind of friend am I?
6. Do I encourage my friends to do what is right and good in the eyes of God?
7. What faults or imperfections do I need to address in myself?
8. In what ways must I purify myself from sin or the affection for sin?

Further Reading

Introduction to the Devout Life: St. Francis de Sales. Part Three, Chapters 17—22.

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What Are Friends For?

SALESIAN PERSPECTIVES

To Help Us Be Our Best!

In the Salesian tradition, having friends is more than just a good or desirable thing: true friends are irreplaceable allies in our efforts to grow in holiness.

Drawing from the Book of Sirach, St. Francis de Sales wrote: "A faithful friend is a strong defense, and those who find one have found a treasure. A faithful friend is the medicine of life and immortality; those who fear the Lord find one." (IDL Part I, Chapter 4)

So important is the subject and nature of friendship that Francis de Sales devotes no less than six chapters of his Introduction to the Devout Life to its consideration. In Part III, Chapter 19, he observed: "Love everyone with a deep love based on charity, but form friendships only with those who can share virtuous things with you. The higher the virtues you share and exchange with others, the more perfect your friendship will be."

"Love everyone with a great love, but have no friendship except for those that communicate with you in the things of virtue."

Three things must be present in order for a relationship to be considered a friendship. "All love is not friendship, because we can love without being loved: in such cases, there is love but not friendship since friendship is *mutual* love, and if not mutual, it is not friendship. *Second*, it is not sufficient for it to be merely mutual. Persons who love each other must be aware of their reciprocal affection: if they are not aware of the affection, it is not friendship. *Third*, there must also be communication between them, and this is the basis of friendship."

"Holy friendship speaks a plain and sincere language. It commends nothing but virtue and the grace of God, the only foundation on which it subsists."

Francis identified *three* levels or kinds of friendship, each of which is recognized by the focus of the exchange between or among the friends being considered: "If this participation is in matters of *knowledge*, the resulting friendship is certainly very praiseworthy. It is still more so if you have *virtues* in common, namely, prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice. If your mutual and reciprocal exchanges concern *charity, devotion and Christian perfection*, O God, how precious this friendship will be!"

Friends, then, when at their best, walk with and encourage one another along the road to salvation.

Of course, like lots of things in life, even friends aren't always at their best. Sometimes our friendships don't exactly draw us closer to God or to the things of God. Francis addressed this reality as well. "There is hardly anyone who is entirely free from imperfections...Everyone has enough bad inclinations of their own without burdening oneself with others'. Friendship requires us to aid and assist one another to be free from every kind of fault. While we must meekly put up with a friend's faults, we must not lead them into faults, much less imitate their faults."

When it comes to sin, however, friendship takes no prisoners. "As to sins, we must neither occasion them nor tolerate them in our friends. Wrote de Sales, "It is either a weak or sinful friendship that watches our friend perish without helping him, that sees the other die of abscess and does not save her life by opening it with the lance of correction. Genuine, living friendship cannot continue in the midst of sin."

"The more exquisite the virtues that are the focus of your communications, the more perfect also shall your friendship be."

Friends are for our growth in health, happiness and holiness on this earth in order to better prepare us to share together the gift of eternal life in heaven.

St. Jane described spiritual friendship this way nearly four hundred years ago to the Sisters of the Visitation: "If we are closely united one with another, we shall walk with great strides to perfection."

God grant us—make us—such friends as we walk together with great strides along the road to perfection!