

OF VIRTUE AND FRIENDSHIP.

At times, the Office of Readings includes a Homily on the Gospel of St. Matthew from St. John Chrysostom. In that reading, the Saint speaks of the Apostles and their mission as noted by Christ, was not just to one city or region, but Christ commanded that the Apostles were to go *into the whole world and baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit*. As St. John Chrysostom note, the “whole world is in a miserable state.” Christ told the Apostles, says the saint, that *you are the salt of the earth*, “indicating that all mankind has lost its savor and has been corrupted by sin. Therefore, he requires of [the Apostles] those virtues which are especially useful and even necessary if they are to bear the burdens of many.” And in a statement reflective of Christ’s words to the Apostles, St. Chrysostom addresses all Christians, (which has a particular meaning to lay members of the Order of Preachers), stating,

For the man who is kindly, modest, merciful and just will not keep his good works to himself but will see to it that these admirable fountains send out their streams for the good of others. Again, the man who is clean of heart, a peacemaker and ardent for truth will order his life so as to contribute to the common good.

These are the virtues of good friend, the blessing of which may grace our lives—most assuredly that of our great Friend who ascended into Heaven and commands us to Love.

In his famous and extraordinarily beautiful work, “Life of Saint Mary Magdalene,”¹ the 19th Century French Dominican friar, Fr. Henri Lacordaire, O.P., expounded on Christ’s friendship with a family in Bethany, not far from Jerusalem, namely Lazarus, along with his sisters, Martha, and, of course, Mary Magdalene. In Chapter One of Fr. Lacordaire’s small but relevant work, the saint commenting on the Friendship of Christ reflected, “Friendship is the most perfect of human emotions, because it is *the most free, the most pure and the most profound*.” Writing on this most pure and profound character of friendship, Fr. Lacordaire describes well the freedom and purity that is typified in the godly friendship of Holy David and Jonathan, the son of Saul, as follows:

It is also that of the virtues of youth. When a young man, helped by this all-powerful grace that comes from Christ, controls his passions under the rule of chastity, he experiences in his heart an expansion in proportion to the constraints of his senses, and the need to love, that is the basis of our nature, is born in him in a naïve ardor that leads him to overflow into a

¹ <http://www.lifeofmarymagdalene.com/lifeofmarymagdalen.html>. (Translated from the French).

soul like hers, fervent and contained. He does not look for long in vain for its appearance. It offers itself to him naturally, as every plant grows from the soil that best suits it. Sympathy is only refused to him who does not inspire it and he inspires it who carries in himself the generous ferment. Every pure heart possesses it, and as a consequence, every pure heart draws toward it, at no matter what age. But how much more so during youth. How much more when the face is adorned with all the graces that soften, and when virtue illuminates it with that other beauty that pleases God himself! Thus appeared David to Jonathan the day when David entered Saul's tent, holding the giant's head in his right hand, and when interrogated by the king as to his origins, he answered him: "I am the son of your servant Isaiah of Bethlehem." Immediately, say the Scriptures, the soul of Jonathan attached itself to that of David, and Jonathan loved him as he loved his own soul. Only a while before, David was looking after his father's flock, Jonathan was on the threshold of a throne, and in an instant the distance between them was abolished; the shepherd and the prince made no more, according to the very words of Scripture, than one soul. It was because in this young man still pale from the weakness of childhood, and nevertheless holding in his virile hand the bloody head of a vanquished enemy, Jonathan had recognized a hero, and because David, in seeing the son of his king leaning towards him, without any jealousy over his victory and without any pride of caste, recognized in this generous movement a heart capable of loving, and worthy in consequence of being loved.

The human covenant between Jonathan and the young Holy David is well described in 1 Samuel 18:13.

The Christian love that Fr. Lacordaire speaks of, is found in Christ. He stated with clarity, that, "Jesus Christ loved souls, and he has transmitted this love to us, which is the very basis of Christianity. No true Christian, no living Christian, can be without a fragment of this love that circulates in our veins like the very blood of Christ. From the moment we love, whether it be in youth or in middle age, as a father or as a husband, as a son or as a friend, we want to save the soul we love, that is to say, give it, at the price of our own life, truth in the faith, virtue in grace, peace in redemption. God at last, God known, God loved, God served, there is that love of souls that adds itself to all the others, and which, far from destroying them, exalts and transforms them until it makes of them something divine, however mortal they be in themselves."

Fr. Lacordaire's dated prose is relevant to us today. Jesus said at John 15:15, "I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made

known to you.” To fall in love with a God, Our God, is to fall in love with a Heavenly Friend.

Another great, but more ancient author about friendship was a secular writer named Marcus Tullius Cicero. In a real way, this ancient writer knew the attributes of Christian love and friendship before even Christ appeared on earth. Cicero lived between 106 B.C. and 43 B.C. He was a Roman senator, consul, augur, philosopher, orator, and lawyer. It is not often that we, as Dominicans, third order all, turn to a secular, and a truly a pagan, source. Yet, Cicero, as testified by his biographers, came to know and to believe in the One True God. He also came to believe that this God is the God of all. Cicero had only his natural talents and intelligence to figure this Truth, but he was a monotheist in the end. (Cicero’s use of reason in coming to believe in the One God is a testimony to St. Thomas Aquinas’ proposition that people can know that God exists by the use of reason).

In his lifetime, Cicero had witnessed the dramatic downfall of the Roman Republic and saw the first Emperor, Gaius Julius Caesar, become ruler of Rome. Cicero’s concern was for the Republic but the idea of the “old” Roman and the Republic were dying with his generation. Cicero only outlived Caesar one year after Caesar was killed on the Ides of March, 44 B.C. in the Roman Senate. Cicero lost his head because he lost favor with young Octavian. Nevertheless, during his time here on earth, Cicero wrote a piece on friendship. And in some ways, his words ring true to this day. In his work *On Friendship*, Cicero said the greatest of all things,

is virtue, virtue, which both creates and preserves friendship. On it depends harmony of interest, permanence, fidelity. When Virtue has reared her head and shewn the light of her countenance, and seen and recognized the same light in another, she gravitates towards it, and in her turn welcomes that which the other has to shew; and from it springs up a flame which you may call love or friendship as you please.

On Friendship, para. 27, Marcus Tullius Cicero (*See*, below). When you read these sweet words, think of Christ, and His sweet virtues, sacrifices, and hopes that have garnered for us a sure place with Him in Paradise, if we but have Faith and obey His Commandments. (*See*, Romans 1:5; and, 1 John 2:3).

Cicero speaks of the tenuous life here in on earth:

But in view of the instability and perishableness of mortal things, we should be continually on the look-out for some to love and by whom to

be loved; for if we lose affection and kindness from our life, we lose all that gives it charm.

Cicero ends his tome on friendship about the virtue of his deceased friend Scipio. Consider, however, how much more of a Friend we have in the living Jesus Christ. Read on carefully:

For me, indeed, though torn away by a sudden stroke, Scipio still lives and ever will live. For it was the virtue of the man that I loved, and that has not suffered death. And it is not my eyes only, because I had all my life a personal experience of it, that never lose sight of it: it will shine to posterity also with undimmed glory. No one will ever cherish a nobler ambition or a loftier hope without thinking his memory and his image the best to put before his eyes. I declare that of all the blessings which either fortune or nature has bestowed upon me I know none to compare with Scipio's friendship. In it I found sympathy in public, counsel in private business; in it too a means of spending my leisure with unalloyed delight. Never, to the best of my knowledge, did I offend him even in the most trivial point; never did I hear a word from him I could have wished unsaid. We had one house, one table, one style of living; . . . Why speak of our eagerness to be ever gaining some knowledge, to be ever learning something, on which we spent all our leisure hours far from the gaze of the world? If the recollection and memory of these things had perished with the man, I could not possibly have endured the regret for one so closely united with me in life and affection. But these things have not perished; they are rather fed and strengthened by reflexion and memory. Even supposing me to have been entirely bereft of them, still my time of life of itself brings me no small consolation: for I cannot have much longer now to bear this regret; and everything that is brief ought to be endurable, however severe.

For Cicero, his point is simple, “For it was the virtue of the man that I loved, and that has not suffered death.” In a real way, how true this is, as *if it is virtue that we treasure in our hearts*, how a great a treasure we will have in Christ and His promises of Heaven. As he also says, Cicero could not have endured the regret of the loss of his friend without knowledge, reflexion and memory. How true for us in the memory of our own friends, relationships, and especially in memory of Christ, at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, when Christ truly shows—each and every time when we attend Mass in His memory—that He is our True Friend.

Finally, Cicero's wisdom reaches out to our century, when he says in closing his work *On Friendship*,

This is all I had to say on friendship. One piece of advice on parting. Make up your minds to this: Virtue (without which friendship is impossible) is first; but next to it, and to it alone, the greatest of all things is Friendship.

Cicero reminds us of our relationship with our friends, in that being virtuous, friendship and relationship with others persons are possible. If a man such as Cicero understood this reality, how more true for Christians to seek and to be virtuous, for as St. John reminds us in the first chapter of St. John's epistle: that if we wish to know Christ, we must obey His Commandments. [1 John 2:3]. To obey His Commandments is to be virtuous and to know Him is to be His friend.

[*On Friendship*: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/cicero-friendship.html>].

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