

May 9, 2021 A Society of Friends: Over the course of many years, the media have taken an interest in the religious faith of our nation's presidents. For instance, when John Fitzgerald Kennedy was running for the presidency, his Catholic faith was intensely scrutinized. In addition, Jimmy Carter's born-again Baptist faith was considered newsworthy; and the two Bushes, father and son, were mentioned for their common faith: Episcopalianism.

In all likelihood, the most surprising one of all was Richard Nixon, who was a Quaker. A religious sect dating back to the Seventeenth Century, the Quakers are pacifists and refuse to take up arms in a time of war. On the silver screen, the legendary actor Gary Cooper portrayed the role of a Shaker farmer in *"Friendly Persuasion"*, an award-winning film dating back to the Fifties.

Quakers belong to a "society of friends", so that whenever they gather for a prayer meeting, it is as an assembly of "Friends". The Late Father Benedict Groeshel, who often appeared on E.W.T.N, once said that if he was not a Catholic, he would certainly be a Quaker.

In four chapters of John's gospel, (Chapters 14-17) Jesus offers words of farewell to his disciples. He prepares them for his eventual departure. His passion and death are imminent.

What is particularly striking is that Jesus addresses the disciples as his friends. "I do not call you servants any longer. I have called you friends". (Jn. 15:15) The word translated as friend means, "beloved of God". The disciples are truly blessed.

Jesus confided in them. He holds nothing back. The intimacy he has with his Father is shared with his disciples. "I have told you everything I have learned from my Father." (Jn. 15:15) Yet the disciples did not show themselves to be loyal friends. In fear for their own lives on the day Christ's crucifixion they abandoned him. Later, after his resurrection, Jesus does not demand an apology from them despite their flaws and shortcomings. Indeed, he gave up his life for them.

"There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends." (Jn. 15:13)

If you are a friend on Face book, as I am, you will undoubtedly be familiar with "unfriending", which means to be removed from one's list of "friends" on this social media platform. Can we imagine Jesus unfriending anyone for any reason?

Late in life, when the Protestant reformer and the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, looked back on his conversion to Christ he described it as the time when he exchanged the faith of a servant/slave for the faith of a son/friend. It proved to be one of the defining moments of his life.

Several years ago, I attended a dinner in honor of a De LaSalle Christian brother, Peter Furlong, on the occasion of his fiftieth anniversary as a consecrated religious man. In his prepared remarks at the end of the dinner, Brother Peter... by his own admission a recovered alcoholic... introduced the guests to his closest friend. He said, "Jesus is my dearest friend. In the past I have turned to him in good times and in bad. He has never disappointed me". He added, "It was not until recently in my religious life that I made the discovery that Jesus wants to be my friend. His friendship changed my life".

To be a friend of Jesus means to keep his commandments and to love as he loved.

What does it mean to be called a friend by Jesus?

In his commentary on this gospel reading the biblical scholar, William Barclay writes, "Jesus called us to be his friends and the friends of God. This is a tremendous offer. It means that no longer do we need to gaze lovingly at God from afar; we are not like slaves who have no right whatsoever to enter into the presence of the master; we are not like the crowd whose only glimpse of the king is in passing on some state occasion. Jesus gave us this intimacy with God, so that he is no longer a distant stranger, but our close friend."

Let us be mindful that those of us gathered here for the Eucharist are not simply a community of faith but a society of friends as well.

Amen!