

# THE PASTOR'S CORNER

## PROPHETS IN OUR MIDST

Pope Francis's most recent encyclical letter, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship*, is nothing if not a commentary on the true nature of friendship and a challenge to the world to take its demands further than the limited scope in which it is usually considered. Signed in Assisi, and beginning with the words of St. Francis, our Holy Father writes that friendship has a social dimension which, more than ever, should be contemplated if we wish our loves to become as perfect as our Heavenly Father's. (*Mathew 5:48*). There are many intermediate steps that can be taken before we are asked to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors; Pope Francis's letter speaks of those possibilities from the Unborn to the poorest of the poor: "[As] friends, we find that our hearts expand as we step out of ourselves and embrace others." (*Fratelli Tutti*, #89)

But the project of friendship should acknowledge beforehand that it is as a sharing in the love which is God Himself: "Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love." (*1 John 4:8*). Much has been written throughout history on friendship (Aristotle, St. Aelred, *ad infinitum*) and much about it has been imagined through the seeming omnipresence of the media, but friendship is always more powerful when we actually see it. The Church, in her high regard for matrimony (it's a sacrament!) for example, understands that the responsibility of parents as the first teachers of their children in the faith is the responsibility of teaching them about love and friendship. Their most effective means for conveying those lessons about love is through their example of friendship as a couple, as parents, as neighbors, as lovers of God.

But we might also look to the example of those who have a special devotion to friendship - the youth in our midst. So many years of frustration and anguish over our "throwaway culture" can tempt adults to a heedlessness about "the poor and the disabled, about the 'not yet useful' - like the unborn, or the 'no longer needed' - like the elderly." (*Fratelli Tutti*, #18). Who have been embodiment of a desire and the hope of including those parts of our human family that have been neglected for the sake of a "carefree existence" as part of their circle of friends? I have seen it in the

members of our youth group who have inspired us to begin a new initiative to be friends to the neediest in the greater Newburgh area. I have been overwhelmed by the vast presence of the young at the annual March for Life on Washington, DC. I finally figured it out what the latest statistics mean when they show that despite an ignorance of God in their lives, young and emerging adults have a hunger to show friendship to those who live in the margins of society. If they want to actualize self, they see it can only be through friendships that go beyond the pale. If they want more, it is a greater experience of friendship for which they ache.

Recently, I became aware of one extraordinary young person who grasped that the spirit of friendship is no childish aspiration. Carlo Acutis will be beatified this Sunday (October 10th) in Assisi. He died after succumbing to leukemia on the 12th of October 2006 at the age of fifteen. From early on, he had an affinity for prayer especially to Our Lady in the Rosary. He was adept with computers and a frequent communicant after his First Holy Communion. (He went to Confession weekly!). While at school in Italy, he often worried over his friends from broken homes and frequently would invite them to his home. He felt deeply for the disabled and was known to confront bullies when they mocked disabled peers. Fascinated with the mystery of the Eucharist, he compiled a website devoted to Eucharistic miracles. What could this devotion suggest but the profound and multitudinous connections we have through the Mystical Body of Christ that for this teen meant innumerable friendships? Indeed, though suffering great pain from his illness, he told the doctor treating him there were many more people suffering much more than he was. Realizing that the Eucharist he received often was the foretaste of heaven, could he have been driven by his faith to the fellowship/friendship of saints in heaven? There is at least one young person to whom Carlo apparently reached out from this privileged community of friends: a young boy from Brazil diagnosed with a rare pancreatic disease who was cured after his family prayed to Carlo. It seemed obvious to Pope Francis, who approved the miracle for beatification.