

Friendship

ON THE NIGHT BEFORE he died, Jesus prayed to his Father: 'May them be one as we are one.' (John 17.11). But from the beginning, in almost every document of the New Testament, we see the disciples divided, quarrelling, excommunicating each other. We are gathered in this Synod because we too are divided and hope and pray for unity of heart and mind. This should be our precious witness in a world which is torn apart by conflict and inequality. The Body of Christ should embody that peace which Jesus promised and for which the world longs.

Yesterday I looked at two sources of division: Our conflicting hopes and different visions of the Church as home. But there is no need for these tensions to tear us apart; We are bearers of a hope beyond hope, and the spacious home of the Kingdom in which the Lord tells us there are 'many dwelling places' (John 14.1).

Of course not every hope or opinion is legitimate. But orthodoxy is spacious and heresy is narrow. The Lord leads his sheep out of the small enclosure of the sheepfold into the wide-open pastures of our faith. At Easter, he will lead them out of the small locked room into the unbounded vastness of God, 'God's plenty[1]'. So let us listen to him together. But how? A German bishop was

concerned by 'the biing tone' during their synodal discussions. He said they had been 'more like a rhetorical exchange of verbal blows' than an orderly debate.'[2] Of course, orderly rational debates are necessary. As a Dominican, I could never deny the importance of reason! But more is needed if we are to reach beyond our differences. The sheep trust the voice of the Lord because it is that of a friend. This Synod will be fruitful if it leads us into a deeper friendship with the Lord and with each other.

On the night before he died, Jesus addressed the disciples who were about to betray, deny, and desert him, saying: 'I call you friends.' (John 15.15). We are embraced by the healing friendship of God which unlocks the doors of the prisons we create for ourselves.

"The invisible God speaks to men and women as friends."

(Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 2).

He opened the way into the eternal friendship of the Trinity. This friendship was offered to his disciples, to tax collectors and prostitutes, to lawyers and foreigners. It was the first taste of the Kingdom.

Both the Old Testament and classical Greece and Rome considered such friendships impossible. Friendship was only between the good. Friendship with the wicked was considered impossible. As Psalm 26 says, 'I hate the company of evildoers and will not

sit with the wicked' (v23). The bad do not have friendships since they only collaborate for evil deeds. But our God was always inclined to shocking friendships. He loved Jacob the trickster; and David, the murderer and adulterer; and Solomon the idolater. Also, friendship was only possible between equals. But grace lifts us up into the divine friendship. Aquinas says *solus Deus deificat*, 'only God can make us godlike.'[1] Today is the Feast of the Guardian Angels, who are signs of the unique friendship that God has for each of us. The Holy Father said on the Feast of the Guardian Angels,

'No one journeys alone and no one should think that they are alone.'[3]

As we journey, we are each embraced by the divine friendship.

Preaching the gospel is never just communicating information. It is an act of friendship. A hundred years ago, Vincent McNabb OP said, 'Love those to whom you preach. If you do not, do not preach. Preach to yourself.'

St Dominic was said to have been loved by all since he loved all. St Catherine of Siena was surrounded by a circle of friends: men and women, lay and religious. They were known as the *Caterinati*, the Catherine people. St Martin de Porres is often shown with a cat, a dog, and a mouse eating from the same dish. A good image of religious life!

There were no easy friendships between men and women in the Old

Testament. The Kingdom broke in with Jesus surrounded by his friends, men and women. Even today, many people doubt the possibility of any innocent friendship between men and women. Men fear accusation; women fear male violence; the young fear abuse. We should embody the spacious friendship of God.

So we preach the gospel by friendships that reach across boundaries. God reached across the division between Creator and creature. What impossible friendships can we make? When Blessed Pierre Claverie was ordained the bishop of Oran in Algeria in 1981, he said to his Muslim friends,

'I owe to you also what I am today. With you in learning Arabic, I learned above all to speak and understand the language of the heart, the language of brotherly friendship, where races and religions commune with each other... For I believe that this friendship comes from God and leads to God.'[4]

Notice, friendship made him who he was!

It was for this friendship that he was murdered by terrorists, along with a young Muslim friend, Mohamed Bouckichi. After his beatification, a play about their friendship was performed, *Pierre et Mohamed*. Mohamed's mother watched the play about the death of her son, and kissed the actor who played him.

The good news the young await to hear from us is that God reaches out to them in friendship. Here is the friend-

ships they desire and for which they search on Instagram and TikTok. When I was a teenager, I was befriended by Catholic priests. With them, I discovered the joy of faith. Alas, the sexual abuse crisis rendered such friendships suspect. More than a sexual sin, it is a sin against friendship. The deepest circle in Dante's *Inferno* was reserved for those who betray friendship.

So the foundation of all that we shall do in this Synod should be the friendships we create. It does not look much. It will not make headlines in the media. 'They came all the way to Rome to make friendships! What a waste!' But it is by friendship that we shall make the transition from 'I' to 'We' (II A. 1. 25). Without it, we shall achieve nothing. When the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, met St John Paul II, he was disappointed that no progress towards unity seemed to have been achieved. But the Pope told him to be confident. 'Affective collegiality precedes effective collegiality.'

The *Instrumentum Laboris* refers to the loneliness of many priests, and 'their need for care, friendship and support.' (B. 2.4., b). The heart of the priest's vocation is the art of friendship. This is the eternal, equal friendship of our Triune God. Then all the poison of clericalism will melt away. The vocation of parenthood can be lonely too and needs sustaining friendships.

Friendship is a creative task. In English we say that we fall in love but we make friends. Jesus asks the lawyer after the parable of the Good Samaritan,

'Which of these three people made himself the neighbour of the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' (Luke 10.36).

He tells the disciples that they must make friends by the use of unrighteous mammon (Luke 16.9). In the Synod, we have the creative task of making improbable friendships, especially with people with whom we disagree. If you think that I am talking nonsense, come and befriend me!

This might sound awful! Imagine me bearing down on you with the grim determination to make you a friend. You will want to run away! But the foundation of friendship is just being with one another. It is the enjoyment of another's presence. Jesus invites the inner circle, Peter, James, and John, to be with him on the mountain, as they will be with him in the garden of Gethsemane. After the Ascension, they look for another to replace Judas, someone who has been with the Lord and with them. Peter said he should be 'one of those who accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among, beginning from the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us.' (Acts 1.21)

Heaven will be just being with the Lord. Four times during the Eucharist we hear the words, 'The Lord be with you.' That is the divine friendship. Sister Wendy Becket described prayer

as 'being unprotected in the presence of the Lord'. Nothing needs to be said. In his book on Spiritual friendship, St Aelred of Rivaulx, the 12th century Cistercian Abbot, wrote "Here we are, you and I, and I hope that Christ makes a third with us. No one can interrupt us now... So come now, dearest friend, reveal your heart and speak your mind.' Will we dare to speak our minds?

In Dominican General Chapters, of course, we debate and take decisions. But we also pray and eat together, go for walks, have a drink, and recreate. We give each other the most precious gift, our time. We build a common life. Then improbable friendships spring up. Ideally, we should have done that during these three weeks of the Synod instead of going our separate ways at the end of the day. Let us hope that this will be possible at the next session of this Synod.

God's creative love gives us space. Herbert McCabe OP wrote: 'The power of God is pre-eminently the power to let things be. "Let there be light"—the creative power is just the power that, because it results in things being what they are, in persons being who they are, cannot interfere with creatures. Obviously creating does not make any difference to things, it lets them be themselves. Creation is simply and solely letting things be, and our love is a faint image of that.[5]'

Often no words are needed. A young Algerian woman called Yasmina left a

card near the place of Pierre Claverie's martyrdom. She wrote on it,

'This evening, Father, I have no words. But I have tears and hope.'[6]

If we are with each other in this way, we shall see each other as if for the first time! When Jesus dined with the Pharisee Simon, a woman, possibly the local prostitute, came in and, weeping, she washed his feet with her tears. Simon is shocked. Doesn't Jesus see who she is? But Jesus replies,

'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.' (Luke 7.44).

Israel had longed to see the face of God. For centuries she had sung, 'Let your face shine on us and we shall be saved.' (Psalm 80). But it was impossible to see God and live. Israel longed for what was unbearable, the sight of the face of God. In Jesus, this face was revealed. The shepherds could look on him as a sleeping baby in the manger and live. God's face became visible, but it was God who died, the eyes closed shut on a cross.

In the Second Eucharistic Prayer, we pray the dead may be welcomed into the light of God's face. The Incarnation is God's visibility. An ancient theologian, possibly St Augustine, imagines a dialogue with the Good Thief who died with Jesus. He says:

'I made no special study of Scripture. I was a full-time robber. But, at a certain moment in my pain and isolation, I found Jesus looking at me and, in his look, I

understood everything.’[7]

In these times between the first and second coming of Christ, we must be that face for each other. We see those who are invisible and smile on those who feel ashamed. An American Dominican, Brian Pierce, visited an exhibition of photos of street kids in Lima, Peru. Under the photo of one young kid was the caption, ‘Sabem que existo pero no me ven.’ They know that I exist but they do not see me. They know that I exist as a problem, a nuisance, a statistic, but they do not see me!

In South Africa, a common greeting is ‘SAWABONA’, ‘I see you’. Millions of people feel invisible. No one looks at them with recognition. Often people are tempted to commit violence just so that people at least to see them! Look, I am here! It feels better to be seen as an enemy than not to be seen at all.

Thomas Merton joined religious life because he wanted to escape the wickedness of the world. But a few years of Cistercian life opened his eyes to the beauty and goodness of people. One day in the street, the scales fell from his eyes. He wrote in his diary,

‘Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts, where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their being, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more greed.’[8]

Our world hungers for friendship, but it is subverted by destructive trends: The rise of populism, in which people are bound together by simplistic narratives, facile slogans, the blindness of the mob. And there is an acute individualism, which means that all I have is my story. Terry Eagleton wrote

‘Journeys are no longer communal but self-tailored, more like hitchhiking than a coach tour. They are no longer mass products but for the most part embarked on alone. The world has ceased to be story-shaped, which means that you can make your life up as you go along.’[9]

But ‘my story’ is our story, the gospel story which can be told in wonderfully different ways.

One last brief point.. C. S. Lewis said that lovers look at each other but friends look in the same direction. They may disagree with each other, but at least they share some of the same questions. I quote:

“‘Do you care about the same truth?’ The [one] who agrees with us that some question, little regarded by others, is of great importance can be our Friend. He need not agree with us about the answer.’[10]

The bravest thing we can do in this Synod is to be truthful about our doubts and questions with each other, the questions to which we have no clear answers. Then we shall draw near as fellow searchers, beggars for the truth. In Graham Greene’s *Don Quixote*, a Spanish Catholic priest and a Communist Mayor make a holiday together. One

day they dare to share their doubts. The priest says,

‘it is odd how sharing a sense of doubt can bring men together perhaps even more than sharing a faith. The believer will fight another believer over a shade of difference; the doubter fights only with himself.[11]’

Pope Francis said in his dialogue with Rabbi Skorka:

‘The great leaders of the people of God were people who left room for doubt... He who wants to be a leader of the people of God has to give God his space; therefore, to shrink, to recede into oneself with doubt, the interior experiences of darkness, of not knowing what to do; all of that ultimately is very purifying. The bad leader is the one who is self-assured, and stubborn. One of the characteristics of a bad leader is to be excessively normative because of his self-assurance.’[12] (On Heaven and Earth, 52)

If there is no shared concern for the truth, then what basis is there for friendship? Friendship is difficult in our society in part because society has either lost confidence in the truth, or else clings to narrow fundamentalist truths which cannot be discussed. Solzhenitsyn said

‘one word of truth outweighs the whole world.’[13]

One of my brethren travelling on a bus overheard two women in the seats in front of him. One was complaining about the sufferings she had to

endure. The other one said: “My dear, you have to be philosophical about it.” “What does ‘philosophical’ mean?” “It means you don’t think about it.”

Friendship flourishes when we dare to share our doubts and seek the truth together. What is the point of talking to people who already know everything or who agree completely? But how are we to do so? That is the topic of the next conference.

[1] Earliest use found in Thomas Bacon (1512/13–1567)

[2] *The Tablet*, Christa Pongratz-Lippitt . 20 March 2023

[3] Homily for the Feast of the Guardian Angels, 2014

[4] Cardinal Murphy O’Connor, *A Life Poured Out*, p. viii

[5] *God Matters*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1987, p. 108

[6] Paul Murray OP, *Scars: Essays, poems and meditations on affliction*, Bloomsbury 2014, p. 47

[7] Quoted by Paul Murray OP, *Scars* p. 143

[8] quoted Willam H. Shannon *Seeds of Peace: Contemplation and non-violence* New York 1996 p. 63

[9] Terry Eagleton, “What’s Your Story?”, in *London Review of Books*, February 16, 2023 <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v45/no4/terry-eagleton/what-s-your-story>

[10] P. 66

[11] Monsignor Quixote, New York: Penguin Classics [1982] 2008, pg. 41

[12] Bergoglio, Jorge Mario and Abraham Skorka. *On Heaven and Earth*. New York: Image [2010] 2013, p. 52, quoted in Marc Bosco, SJ, ‘Colouring Catholicism: Greene in the Age of Pope Francis’.

[13] Nobel Prize Speech 1970 ‘One Word of Truth’