Toward a Radically Improved Friendship in the Priesthood

Eugene Hemrick

Camaraderie and friendship imply much more than meets the eye. Above all else, they require adjustments and commitments that include uprooting and re-rooting, hence the reason for saying we need a new, radical friendship in the priesthood.

The government is broken!"Of all the reasons for saying the government is broken, incivility and the inability to work across the aisle rank near the top. With greater frequency, the press and the media have been spotlighting incivility within Congress and its spread among Americans.

Among its meanings, civility connotes the idea of home. When we are civil, we feel at home with each other! The absence of working together and across the aisle is not limited to Congress and the public at large; there also seems to be a distance from one another in the priesthood and the need to practice better the qualities of friendship. Unlike the harshness and incivility found in politics, priests are not so much uncivil to each other. Rather they need to cross the aisle and feel more at home with each other. Priestly fraternity can no longer be taken for granted. Why do we say this? There is an old saying, "The door that squeaks loudest gets the

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most oil.” Recently, two cardinals have pointed to clerical squeaks that need greater attention: better knowing each other and creating stronger bonds of friendship. It is no exaggeration to say all dioceses face these challenges.

In an interview by John Allen of the National Catholic Reporter with Cardinal Sean O’Malley of Boston about the visitation of nuns by the Vatican, Allen asked, “Does some of the suspicion out there reflect the fact that bishops and women religious have grown apart over the last forty years?”

O’Malley replied, “That may be, though on the side of the bishops part of the reason for that has been to respect the autonomy of the communities. I hear all of these horror stories about my predecessor, Cardinal O’Connell, who used to choose the names for the nuns and tell them how long their veil could be, all this kind of nonsense. I think we’ve gone to the other extreme, where the sisters are estranged from the hierarchy. In the past there was too much interference in the internal life of the communities, and we reacted against that by emphasizing their autonomy. In practice, that probably means that sometimes we don’t know one another as well as we should” (O’Malley).

Allen’s question about growing apart and O’Malley’s mention of “not knowing one another” indicates that religious life and hierarchy aren’t as at home with each as could be desired.

Recently Cardinal Roger Mahoney of Los Angeles wrote a pastoral letter to his priests that raises concerns similar to those raised by O’Malley. In it, he calls for a renewal of friendship and camaraderie among priests, pastors, deans, and regional bishops. Sensing that they aren’t as friendly with each other as they should be, he observes, “No parish exists or thrives spiritually and pastorally in isolation from all other parishes and no priest exists or thrives spiritually and pastorally in isolation from other priests.”

Mahoney points to “creeping isolation” among priests and to the need for two essential expressions of affective fraternity among priests living in the same residence: praying together and sharing meals together.

“Without those two pillars of priestly fraternity, we tend to drift apart and into a mysterious isolation in the same house,” Mahoney observes. Affective priestly fraternity must be intentional and worked at and never taken for granted, he emphasizes. What in particular needs fixing, according to Mahoney?

First, “being available for each other for prayer and for meals is not an option here—it is the living out of our shared priestly ministry in this local church.” On this point he commented, “that there is something about table fellowship among priests which energizes us and gives us new strengths, shared hopes and a broader awareness of the Spirit working in and through each one.”

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Second, “Pastors and parish administrators: You have a first-line responsibility to make certain that there are times during the week when you and the priests living in your parish—both associate pastors and in-residence priests—gather for some form of shared prayer. . . . But you, the pastor or parish administrator, must give the leadership here, decide which days will be observed together and help hold one another accountable.”

Third, “priests living alone need to link up with a neighboring parish or parishes to share meals and prayer time during the week. We also need to include our retired priests residing in our parishes, whether they live in the rectory or privately.”

Fourth, “Deans: I am asking our deans to do a reality check with each and every parish in your deanery. Which parishes provide opportunities for prayer and for meals? Which ones do not and why not? And what are those pastors or administrators planning to do about this?”

Fifth, “Regional bishops: I am asking you to bring this topic up each month when you meet with your deans and council of priests’ representatives. You need to emphasize the importance of genuine priestly fraternity—not something forced and artificial but something looked forward to happening on a regular basis” (Mahoney).

Building Camaraderie and Friendship

Why did Mahoney write his pastoral at this particular time? One reason is the growing number of international priests found in his archdiocese and throughout the country. It is estimated that 5,500 are in service in the United States and that 1,500 have returned home after serving five or more years. International priests are much younger than American-born priests, and loneliness is more acute among them (Hoge and Okure).

These and other statistics indicate a growing need to create new, radical friendships in which international priests feel at home with a U.S. American presbyterate! The challenge is a two-way street: U.S. priests need to reach out more to international priests and make them feel at home, and international priests in turn need to often work toward a common camaraderie.

Friendship and camaraderie come easiest when both parties are of the same culture. When we speak of creating a radical friendship, it is because international priests and U.S. priests may not share the same culture. Often the spoken idiom is not the same, even though the same language is spoken. Often traditions are foreign to each other and sometimes a cause of conflict. More often than not this creates a “them-and-us” environment instead of a “we” atmosphere. It is one thing to have everyone pray the breviary in English together, yet another to switch back and forth between languages; to eat American cuisine, yet another to eat the unfamiliar cuisine of another culture; to feel at home with customs and traditions,
yet another thing to feel unfamiliar and even threatened by them; to smile at each
other and exchange pleasantries, yet another to feel solidarity; to have simpatico
and an affection for another, and yet another to work hand in hand with another.
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they require adjustments and commitments that include uprooting and re-rooting—
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Another reason for asserting this call is that priests aren’t at home in their pres-
byterates due to not having attended the same seminary. A good number of newly
ordained priests have few or no classmates in their dioceses. Many start from scratch
when it comes to making new friendships among brother priests in their diocese.

The fact that many pastors administer several parishes instead of one is another
reason priests are growing apart more. When a priest is running between parishes
and doing all he can do to form bonds with parishioners, it is all the more difficult
to form deeper bonds with brother priests.

And then there is the age-old problem of priests who are malcontents and seldom
participate in diocesan events. For all practical purposes they are not an integral
part of the presbyterate. It must be asked, do we just leave them alone, or do we
devote ourselves to developing a friendship that is capable of bringing them back
into the fold?

Cultivating Friendship

When we talk of friendship, what exactly do we mean? Definitions of friendship abound, ranging from those defined by Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero to the
fathers of the church, Augustine, Gregory, Bernard of Clairvaux, Aelred of Rievaulx, Thomas Aquinas, and Francis of Assisi.

Cicero defines friendship as mutual harmony in affairs human and divine coupled
with charity and beneficence (Cicero). The idea of harmony is key to Cicero’s thinking, as it is to many of the classical writers. In his treatise on duty, Cicero counsels his son Marcus to speak harmoniously. When we talk of harmony in the priesthood, we are speaking about a healthy order, unity, and balance in which priests are aligned with each other in their thinking, ministry, and especially theology.

Classical and spiritual definitions inspire ideals, but like all ideals they leave us
with the task of translating them into reality and practical applications. Where
might we start to accomplish this? Classical and spiritual quotes often contain
more practical wisdom in one sentence than we can ascertain in volumes of writing. Let’s examine quotes that demonstrate how the priesthood might respond better to the challenge of practicing a new millennium friendship.

In the book of Sirach we hear, “A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter; he who finds
one finds treasure” (Sir 6:14). The Roman comic dramatist, Titus Maccius Plautus,
reminds us, “Nothing is there more friendly to a man than a friend in need.”
The word “tranquil” in Greek is *karein*, meaning to come out of the heat. It reminds us that priests are not exempt from a turbulent life. Like those they serve, they may suffer from addictions, ill health, and temptations that weigh heavily on them. Often they need a “sturdy shelter” to restore a semblance of tranquility. The friendship of which Sirach and Plautus speak is more than eating, praying, and recreating together; it also includes a sensitive awareness of the spiritual, psychological, and physical health of our brother priests and caring for their welfare.

In defining the charity and beneficence of which Cicero speaks, Aelred of Rievaulx states that charity is an expression of the heart. Beneficence, however, is carrying it out in deed (Aelred of Rievaulx).

In addition to ministering to our people, priests need to minister to priests, to sense their difficulties and move into action in helping them overcome them. Here friendship would ask, when was it last we were all there for a brother priest as a sturdy shelter, helping him through a troubled moment? Do we see this as an essential part of a priestly calling?

Over the years, many priests have had to leave their dioceses for reasons of alcohol addiction, depression, drug dependency, or other serious problems. Friendship would ask, did we ever write them or give them a call? Did we ever assure them of our support? Note how this goes beyond just praying and eating together. It means going into action and walking the extra mile.

An old Sicilian quote reminds us of another wise principle of friendship, “Only your real friends will tell you when you have a dirty face.”

Some years ago, Archbishop Michael Sheehan of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe wrote a pastoral letter to his priests encouraging them to practice fraternal correction and not only to look out for each other, but to call out a brother priest if he needs to be. It was contended that if this was practiced ever so little more, it could help to stem undesirable dysfunctions in the priesthood (Sheehan).

In his schema on love, St. Thomas Aquinas includes fraternal correction in telling us love consists of mercy, joy, peace, beneficence, alms, deeds, and fraternal correction. To practice true friendship we must also be able to tell it as it is and practice “tough love.” [Interestingly, the word “friend” (*amico/ca*) in Latin comes from love, indicating love and friendship are essential to each other, this in contrast to an acquaintance that does not necessarily require love.]

Yet another dimension of friendship that comes from Cicero states, “Counsel, conversation, encouragement, consolation, sometimes even criticism are found at
their best among friends.” Note how friendship includes criticism, or, to put it in another way, fraternal correction.

When Cicero points us to counseling, he raises the question, how much do we ever counsel our brother priests? Is this to be left to a confessor or spiritual director? Do priests feel uncomfortable counseling their own? Furthermore, when a priest becomes a loner, is there an effort to make him feel he has friends who need him and who are there for him? One of the Latin meanings of the word consult is to call together. Here friendship would ask, have we ever considered calling a brother priest who tends to be a loner for a get-together?

How might the encouragement Cicero cites play out? In social sciences we speak of operationalizing words. It is one thing to encourage a person by saying, “You did a good job!” It is yet another thing to define what we mean by good and spell out its specifics, e.g., that was a well-thought out idea of yours, especially, etc.!” “I like the creative touch you have in the way you administer your parish, especially, etc.” In cases like this, friendship would counsel us to define more fully the particulars in an encouraging remark.

Cicero’s emphasis on consolation is especially apropos to the priesthood. When a priest loses a parent or sibling, nothing is more consoling than brother priests attending the wake and funeral Mass. If this isn’t possible, receiving a note of heartfelt condolence and the moral strength it generates are very comforting. All it takes is picking up a pen and taking a few moments to enter into the sorrow of a brother priest and be at his side. As we can see, Cicero’s quote on friendship is filled with sound practical wisdom.

English Quaker and founder of Pennsylvania, William Penn gives us another timely quote on friendship, especially in our multicultural age, “There can be no friendship where there is no freedom.”

How might we break this open? The word for “reverence” in German is ehrfurcht, meaning fear and honor. On the topic of reverence, the renowned theologian Fr. Romano Guardini states, “Respect requires privacy for the other person, in the sphere of his own being and in connection with those among whom he lives and to whom he is related, his family and friends.” (Guardini)

In true friendship, one does not possess the other or get so close to the other that he or she smothers the other. When this is applied to the priesthood, it means helping each other but always keeping a respectful distance, thus giving the other his space. We may help an international priest speak better English, or an international priest may teach us about his understanding of theology or language, but efforts like these should never be overbearing. The reverend that precedes our name must always be revered.
English critic, scholar and novelist C.S. Lewis gives us yet another principle of great value to friendship: “Friendship is born at the moment when one person says to another: What! You too? I thought I was the only one.”

On retreats I conduct, I experience the wisdom of this quote par excellence. In one of their sessions, five priests are invited to share their journey through the priesthood with those on retreat and especially to share their greatest and most difficult times. It is, by far, the best session. Why do I say this? No priest sails smoothly through the priesthood. All have experienced trials, tribulations and setbacks. Most priests, like laypersons, tend to keep their troubles to themselves.

When priests share their stories and especially their difficulties, it is like a new light has been turned on in the priesthood. Suddenly there is that “ah ha,” gestalt feeling, “What! You too? I thought I was the only one.”

Another excellent outcome resulting from sharing stories is getting to truly know each other. In Latin, the word “to know” requires two different verbs, cognoscere and sapere: to know a person intimately and personally and to know about facts and figures that are less personal.

With some exceptions, priests don’t know (cognoscere) each other as a presbyterate. As Cardinals Mahoney and O’Malley imply, too many live in isolation due to new millennium circumstances that often militate against this.

**Truest Understanding of Friendship**

We could stop here and title all that has been written, “Course 101 on Friendship.” But this would deprive us of the truest understanding of friendship that exists. And where else but in the bible is it found. Throughout the Old Testament, we are reminded that even though we may deny God, God will never deny us because God can’t deny himself. God’s friendship is perpetual and is the ultimate model for priestly friendship.

When we turn to Isaiah, we have a pastoral scene that reminds us that no matter how unlikely it may seem to bond together in greater friendship, it is far from impossible. He observes, “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest (Isa 11: 6).

In the New Testament, Christ is the epitome of friendship. In his book *Introduction to Christianity*, Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, enumerates the principles upon which Christianity is built. One of the principles is the proposition
for. Christ lived and died for us. No better principle sums up all that has been written here about friendship.

References


