

What is friendship?

By Fr. Michael Carney

Intro:

I'm glad to be with you, and to talk about something that matters, something important.

All of you are deeply involved in learning. You are working – and most of you are working *hard* – to learn some job skills, or some academic discipline.

You get it. No one is able to become an architect, a nurse, a teacher without lots of education, effort, and experience. But somehow, there's no class offered in how to become human. Becoming human – the most important thing – is something we're often left to figure out alone.

There's a sense in which our whole life in the Church is a kind of school in which we learn how to become human, truly alive, able to become what we were created to be. One of the great things about retreats like this is that it gives us the opportunity to look at the most important things, the things that sometimes fall through the cracks otherwise – or, let's face it – the things that our society doesn't seem to want us to look at.

St. Gregory of Sinai tells us: "*Become what you already are*". We're born human, of course. We're not born golden retrievers or cows. But at the same time, we *become* human. And to become fully human, fully alive, is not easy. But some of you know that already, don't you?

It used to be that when we'd meet a really human person, one you could rely on, one who had some integrity and courage, one who had compassion for others, we'd say "now THERE'S a real man", "*that's* a real woman". Now, of course, these expressions have become sexualized. And in our political correctness, we aren't even allowed to admit what we all know – that there is a big difference between being a man and a woman. But in some languages, like Yiddish, they still have a word for this. They call a real person a "mensch", if they're a man. And if they're a woman, they call her "a woman of stature". And this is not a matter of height! Matushka Ann Lardas is maybe 5'4"? But her talk has shown us you can be a woman of stature at 5'4".

The person we can become is not limited by height or intelligence or other accident of birth. As one of my favorite philosophers wrote in his metaphysical classic, Winnie the Pooh: "*Piglet noticed that even though he*

had a Very Small Heart, it could hold a rather large amount of Gratitude.”
I suppose you could say that he had become a Piglet of stature.

Becoming a *mensch*, becoming a woman of stature is not something you can do by yourself. A big part of becoming human happens through friendship.

Someone once said: *“Friendship is the hardest thing in the world to explain. It's not something you learn in school. But if you haven't learned the meaning of friendship, you really haven't learned anything.”* Can you guess who it was who said that - Mister Rogers? Mother Teresa? Nope. It was Muhammad Ali – a man who made his living by beating men’s faces into hamburger. Yet even he had friends and appreciated them. Do we think of him a little bit differently knowing that he said this?

So, what is a friend?

If you google the word *friendship* you will get approximately fifteen kagillion hits. Obviously, there are a lot of definitions. In English, it seems that everybody is a “friend”. We might have 500 Facebook “friends”. And it’s been said that being proud of having a whole lot of Facebook friends is like being proud that you sit at the “cool table” in the insane asylum. Maybe our definition of *friend* needs tightening up? In other languages, like Russian for instance, one might have few friends, only a handful of *друзья*. Most people that we Americans call *friends*, Russians would call by other names: *знакомый, приятель, товарищ*, etc. Languages like Russian remind us that there is a whole spectrum of friendship, that not all friends are created equal. Sometimes we have to learn this the hard way.

A friend in the best sense, the friend that we all are looking for, is someone who we can be ourselves with, with no fakeness, no posing. And a friend is someone who will stay with us when we’re *not* ourselves. And they’ll stay with us until we are ourselves again. Again, Piglet has something to teach us. You think I’m kidding? When we read Winnie the Pooh with our eyes and hearts open, we realize that this is the complicated story of several friends, who cut each other a lot of slack, who forgive each other, who give each other space when they need it, and all the other things necessary to maintain a friendship. Here are some moments:

*“I wonder what Piglet is doing,” thought Pooh.
“I wish I were there to be doing it, too.”*

"Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind.

"Pooh!" he whispered.

"Yes, Piglet?"

*"Nothing," said Piglet, taking Pooh's paw. "I just wanted to be sure of you."
(the House at Pooh Corner)*

"It is more fun to talk with someone who doesn't use long, difficult words but rather short, easy words like "What about lunch?"

"I don't feel very much like Pooh today," said Pooh.

"There, there," said Piglet. "I'll bring you tea and honey until you do."

One of the greatest things about preparing this talk was that I got to ask some of my friends about friendship and what it meant to them. One of them wrote me:

*"When I was a kid, maybe 7 or 8 years old, the housing project where I lived was predominately white, actually we were the only black family come to think of it. By the time I reached junior high that was no longer the case, but that's another story. One afternoon I was in a small circle with some other boys and we were playing with our G.I. Joe action figures. Suddenly, a larger group of boys walked up to us and started yelling n***er, burnt toast, monkey and other names. Once they had their fill the "leader" called to the boys I was playing with. All of them got up and joined them except one, Jerry Lynch. The head of the group asked why he wasn't going with them and he said, Doug (as I was known) is my friend. At this, they started calling him all of the names they called me. I remember looking at Jerry's face and thinking "what they're saying doesn't bother him." After a while they left and it was just the two of us. That day Jerry taught me what it means to be a friend. One of my deepest regrets in life is not being as good a friend to others as Jerry has been to me."*

Wow. Now that's a friend! My friend who wrote this is a grown man, but after all these years he still remembers the full name of his friend that day in the playground. Is that a surprise to any of you? Of course not. Do any of you have friends like that? Are any of *you* friends to others the way Jerry was to my friend Doug?

If I could step back from this a minute, I'd like to ask another question. If we're not going to be able to become truly human by ourselves, if we need friends to do it, then isn't this something that God would be interested in providing for us? We can – and we should – pray that God send us friends, real friends who will lead us up, not down. And we should pray that we can become that kind of friend to others.

Another very neat friend of mine is the mother of a pre-teen daughter. She wrote this to me about what she tells to her daughter about friendship:

“Here's what I told Anya recently:

“A true friend doesn't allow any harm to come to their friend.

“A true friend will protect their friend from others AND from themselves. In that- If a friend is doing something stupid, dangerous, bad for himself or for others, the true friend WILL go to the parents, or another trustworthy adult and share the information of poor or dangerous behaviour.

“Even if they think that friend will be angry, upset, hate him..... whatever.”

What my friend is telling her daughter is that a *true* friend loves their friend so much that they will risk the friendship to save the friend. They love their friend so much that they would rather their friend hate them than hurt themselves.

Do you have a friend who's really got your back like that? Are you that kind of friend to anybody? It takes a lot of courage. A lot of selflessness. Until we know how deeply we ourselves are loved, probably that kind of love is impossible. That's the kind of love the martyrs had.

Nowadays, some say “if you are my friend, you must support everything I do.” Sometimes we have so little sense of who we really are that we identify ourselves with some behavior – even with some pathology or addiction. And we demand that others accept these pathologies or they are “haters”. But a real friend keeps looking for the true self hidden beneath the various defenses and disguises all of us learn to put on. To love like this is not easy, and is not learned quickly.

Fake friends and fool's gold:

In the Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament we read: *There are friends who pretend to be friends, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.* Prov. 18:24

Because friendship is so necessary for our life, it is very precious. And precious things are the things that get faked. Nobody makes counterfeit pennies. They make counterfeit twenties. You've heard of fool's gold, right? It looks like gold, glitters like gold, but is practically worthless. But you haven't heard of fool's *dirt*, right? Dirt is worthless already.

There are fake friends, and by your age you have probably met some. I'm sorry about that. But I would be sorrier if you have *been* one of those. I'm sorry to say that I have been a fake friend sometimes in my life.

What's fake about fake friendship?

Fake friendship demands that others prove their friendship. Think of those Facebook posts which say things like: "*I want to know who my real friends are. If you are, repost this on your wall.*" True friends aren't bullies. They don't intimidate. There's a big difference between making friends and taking prisoners.

But there are worse ways to coerce. The girl who uses her popularity to mock other girls isn't even a friend to the admiring clique she gathers around herself. She just uses them the way she would a mirror, to reflect back to herself how great she is - or wants to believe she is! The guy who wants a girl to prove her "friendship" by taking a picture of herself nude and sending it to him on Twitter - that's not being a friend. That's being a sexual predator! *A friend with benefits* isn't a friend. And losing your purity and integrity aren't benefits, either. Let's call these things what they are.

A real friend lets someone be themselves. He doesn't try to twist them to fit our own image. A 20th century monk once said: "If in loving (someone) we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we only love the reflection of ourselves we find in them" . Years ago, I was engaged to a very fine young woman. But when a person I respected said to me "Michael, X___ is a female version of YOU!", it was a wake-up call. I didn't love her, really. I loved the reflection of myself I saw in her." Thank the Lord, we both woke up, and married other people more suited to us.

After a while, we learn how to distinguish between real and fake friendship. We don't feel pressure to "perform" with a real friend. Sometimes we can feel that we've known a friend for many years, even if we haven't. This is often a sign that there is a deep comfort in the relationship, that no one is in it because they "want something" from the other. This is a sign - but not the only sign - of a real friendship.

Becoming a friend

I heard a young person say a while back "I have hundreds of Facebook friends, but feel totally alone and empty." Perhaps some of you feel this way. Probably all human beings have felt this emptiness - and this emptiness is one of the reasons we plug ourselves into our cellphones 24/7.

One of the great modern saints of our Church is St. Porphyrios of Mt. Athos. He lived as a monk in Greece, and reposed in the '80s. He has something to say about this emptiness and its cure. We might not like what he says, but if we knew him, and the love that thousands – even millions of people have for him, we'd know that it works. He said: *"Today people ask to be loved and that is why they are disappointed. The right thing to do is not to care whether they love you or not at all, but rather if **you** love Christ and other people. This is the only way in which the soul is filled."*

Do you see how he's flipped this whole friendship thing upside down? We all want friends, and society tells us how to "get" them. But St. Porphyrios says instead: *"**Be** the friend that you'd like to have. Be that friend to someone else. And before anything else, be a friend of Christ."* If we become a friend, we will get friends. This is not a matter of being outgoing and extroverted. It is a matter of being real. And like all good things, it takes work. As Winnie the Pooh teaches us: *"You can't stay in your corner of the Forest waiting for others to come to you. You have to go to them sometimes."*

Sometimes we are so afraid of being rejected that we just don't try. We have such a bad self-image, or have been hurt so much, we are convinced that if we do reach out, other people will run away. Remember the old Simon & Garfunkel song: "I am a rock, I am an island"? "and a rock feels no pain. And an island never cries." When these thoughts come to us, let's call them out for the lies they are, make the sign of the Cross, and let Christ lead us out of the prison of our isolation.

We can be so hard on ourselves. When we're isolated, we can see only our worst sides, or even bad things that aren't there. "We need someone else to get close enough to tell us we're wrong. Someone we trust." It will probably hurt to get to that point of trust and closeness. But as Bob Marley said: *"The truth is, everyone is going to hurt you. You just got to find the ones worth suffering for."* Without risking that pain, without seeing our own worth reflected back from the face of one who accepts us, we will never truly become human. By the way, this is why prayer is such an important part of becoming human. Only God loves us perfectly. We have to spend some time, at church and at home, soaking that in.

One of my own friends, a young married man and father, who has thought a lot about how to make friends and be a friend, wrote me the following:

1. *Having good relationships is a skill like anything else. Many people often need to learn how to develop and make friends. If you find it hard to make friends - you're not alone, and it's not too late to learn this skill. The sooner you get started the better.*

2. *Friendships often start with small talk. Come up with a few simple lines - my wife always asks people to tell her a story. I use the classic introduction "Hi! My name's Nate" - works like a charm.*

3. *To start a friendship, I find whatever common ground I have with the person (sports, music, games, books, etc) and build the relationship from there. I make lots of friends.*

4. *Friendships require time. Find common hobbies. Enjoy meals. Take time to listen when someone is having a hard day. This is one of the best gifts you can give as a friend. I have found my best friends by helping people through hard times and being willing to say I'm sorry.*

5. *Friendship requires intentionality, they are harder to build when you get older, and people's life become fuller. This means if you want friends you probably have to be the one that initiates the interaction.*

6. *Out of friendships develop relationships. I spent years calling friends. This initiating interaction, helped me to find people I can trust.*

7. *Guard your heart. A person needs to earn my trust in order for me share my deep feeling with them.*

A person might be perfectly safe to say have lunch with and enjoy small talk or work jokes with, but when it comes to sharing your heart maybe you get a little red flag. Trust your instinct. You can tell when someone is not ready to walk through a hard time with you when they interrupt your sharing in their own uncomfortability, this is just a sign they need more time to grow and not a reflection on you. I think of as a circle of trust. Not everyone is allowed near my heart.

7. *Friendships are the foundations of relationships.*

8. *If you want to have successful romantic relationships later in life focus on developing friendship skills - with members of the opposite sex. This builds your empathy and kindness.*

9. *Before I met my wife I had several close female (and male) friends. I benefited greatly from them to develop as a healthy person. Most came to our wedding. All are still my friends.*

10. *If you want to be a relationally healthy person (in romance, the workplace, etc) with strong friendships throughout life, work on your inner, emotional health. Work on your addictions and your brokenness. As you move these wounds out of the way the sadness and pain in your heart are exposed. This is a heart space specially designed to be filled with God and PEOPLE to fill and for your relationships to deepen. When you are feeling the down, choose to reach out to someone you can trust. You are taking a step toward a healthy and a more satisfied life.*

Christ the friend of mankind

A very good friend of mine is a priest. But he used to be involved in some very bad stuff. (And I'm not outing anybody – he's not here!) When he was a young man, he was involved in a demonstration, and he threw some bricks at police cars. You get thrown in jail for doing things like that, and he did.

But he had a good friend named Robert. And Robert couldn't stand the idea of his friend being in jail without a friendly face. So he tried to visit him, but they didn't let him in, since he wasn't a relative.

So he thought about it and made up his mind. He went to a local store, made sure that the security guard was watching him, and stole a carton of cigarettes. He left the store and stood in front of it, holding the carton of cigarettes, waiting to be arrested, which of course he was. And they put him in the same jail. Or rather, he put *himself* in jail in order to comfort his friend.

I don't know if I've got it in me to BE a friend like that, but I sure would like to have one. For the Lord says: "Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friend."

Leaving aside some details (like the fact that a felony was involved...), this story has certain parallels to the story of a Friend that we do already have.

For Christ also saw the desperate state of His friend. He saw him - us! – in a prison sentence we had earned fair and square. And we were never going to get out by ourselves. So He became one of us, became our brother, without ceasing to be the God who had made the whole world. In the Creed, we say that He was "conceived of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man". He was given over, or rather gave *Himself over* to death, and entered that prison of Hades.

But there the story gets better. Robert entered prison but couldn't get himself – much less his friend - out. He could only suffer with his friend.

Christ *did* suffer - for us and with us – more than we can imagine. But Christ set His friend free. Set *us* free. He blew up Hades, rose from the dead, and ascended to His Father (now, *our* Father!)

If you think you don't have any friends, think again.

The Lord says:

No longer do I call you servants,
for the servant does not know what his master is doing;
but I have called you friends,
for all that I have heard from my Father
I have made known to you. John 15:15

He, the Lord of hosts, calls Himself our friend. And there can be no better, no truer, no closer friend than Him.

If we love Him, we will treat Him the way we would treat another friend. We will not betray Him by our actions or words. We won't be a fake friend. "If you love me, keep my commandments." "And my commandments are not burdensome." And before we keep His commandments, we need to learn them in the first place.

Atheists and people of little faith can say "Your religion is just a matter of rules and regulations. I'm free and can do what I want." But if we love someone, there are all sorts of things we don't do anymore. If a man loves his children, he gets up and goes to work rather than play video games all day – otherwise they'll be on the street when the mortgage isn't paid. If a young man loves a girl, he doesn't talk trash about her all over school. The so-called "rules and regulations" of church life, if we practice them thoughtfully, are tools that can teach us how to love God and love each other.

In Irish, the language of my ancestors, there is an expression *cara leis an anam*. It means *friend of the soul*. The Irish expression for a spiritual father is *Anam cara* – soul friend. St. Porphyrios, mentioned above, is one of the great soul friends of our times. He became a true friend of God. By his prayers he invites us to do the same, and by his example and his teaching he shows us how. Here is what he says:

'And I always pray that my spiritual children will love God – which is everything – so that He may deem us worthy to enter His uncreated Church here on earth. For it is here that we must begin. I have always tried to pray and to read the hymns of the Church, Holy Scripture and the lives of our saints, and I pray that you will do the same. I have tried to

draw near to God through God's Grace and I pray that you will do the same.'

'Wherever we find Christ, even if it is a cave, we stay there and are afraid to leave in case we lose Christ'.

'He who has given his heart to Christ will not suffer, however many difficulties he experiences. He is glad, he is full of inner joy. He is dynamic. He is careful. He does not make mistakes or cause harm. His mind, his hands and his feet are all propelled by God's Grace. How could he possibly be stupid?'

'Well, that is indeed how we should view Christ. He is our friend, He is our brother, He is whatever is beautiful and good. He is everything. But most of all He is our friend and He cries out: "Look here, you are my friends, can't you understand that? We are brothers... Look, I'm not... I'm not brandishing Hell as a weapon, I don't want to scare you, I love you. I want you to enjoy life with me".'

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