

Having Jesus in common

By Father David K. O'Rourke, OP
NC News Service

For a moment think of the people who followed Jesus. What drew them together?

The followers of Jesus had just about one thing in common — Jesus. That may be a bit overstated, but not by much.

Jesus created a circle of friends from people who, under normal circumstances, might not have given each other the time of day.

In gathering his disciples Jesus did something almost revolutionary. He crossed very solid political, social, religious and class lines.

It was a time and a place in which the barriers that separated people were valued and maintained. The group you belonged to said a lot about who you were, what work you did, whom you married and what you owned.

Jesus asked his followers to leave all that behind.

He must have had a very attractive personality. For the people came, not as zealots plotting a revolt, not as cult members. They came to be with him.

It was Jesus as a person who was their common point, his friendship that they wanted.

The attraction of people to Jesus is recorded in a number of places. Once after several hectic days, Jesus went off for a few moments of quiet. The people came looking for him. "We wanted to see you, but you were gone," they said.

There's almost a sense of reproach in that statement, like the disappointment of a child on finding that a parent is not home.

What do we know of the friends of Jesus?

There was Peter. An able organizer and natural leader, he was the head of what we would call a fishing cooperative. But, like most people in his exploited region, he was not well-off.

By contrast, at the top of the social ladder in Jesus' time, there were men like Joseph of Arimathea. He gave his tomb for the body of Jesus. There was Nicodemus, who took the body of Jesus from the cross for burial. Both were influential members of the Sanhedrin, the nation's supreme council.

Rich, successful politicians in those days did not tend to mix with poor folk, especially not those from places like Galilee, which they looked down upon as a wild and woolly frontier.

But, attraction to Jesus overcame these forceful barriers.

What was the source of this attraction? The friendship Jesus offered, a friendship so strong it rivaled family ties.

Once, in this clan-run country, Jesus was told that his relatives wanted him outside. But he pointed to his followers and said, "Those are my family."

Today people in the church continue to look for models of what it means to be a community. We don't have to look far. We have the friendship between Christ and his followers.

The church has grown beyond the local conditions that marked the time of Christ. But friendship was no easier in the time of Jesus. If anything, the barriers between people were even greater then.

In my ministry I have seen how central real friendship is to a living community. Friendship provides a solid, human base when it comes to living our faith.

But friendship centered on Christ gives even more. Why did you leave everything to follow me? Jesus asked a friend one day. "You have the words of eternal life," the friend responded.

Within the church we believe that our friendship for each other anticipates that eternal life.

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A Friend indeed

From fishermen to Pharisees — Jesus' cast of friends

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

It was bad enough to welcome some of the people Jesus welcomed. But to eat with them! That was unforgivable.

In the land of Jesus — in that culture — the sharing of a meal forged an intimate bond of kinship among the diners. This is what was perplexing about Jesus to some people in his culture.

More than once we hear people complain, with evident shock and disapproval: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." (All those subject to disapproval were automatically stereotyped as "sinners.")

Indeed, during one dinner he had the audacity to hold up a streetwalker, who washed his feet with her tears in thanksgiving for his forgiveness, as an example to others. Luke, who

always treats women very considerately, doesn't name the woman, apparently out of concern for her reputation.

It's not quite accurate to say that this woman crashed the party. Ordinarily the dining rooms were on the ground floor in Jewish homes and open to the street. Passersby often dropped in and sat along the wall listening to the interesting table talk of people in the know. The woman could have taken advantage of this opportunity to get near Jesus. Then it was only a few short steps from her place by the wall to Jesus' feet.

The diners reclined on cushions around low serving tables with their legs extending out into the room. They helped themselves to the food from a common dish or dishes.

This emphasized the bond of unity forged by eating together. All

of the diners quite visibly shared the same food, were nourished by the same substance and became intimately one as a result.

St. Paul reflects that custom in connection with the Eucharist in I Cor. 10:17. Here he writes, because "the loaf of bread is one, we, many though we are, are one body for we all partake of the one loaf."

Jesus' treatment of the streetwalker isn't unusual. The fact is that he befriended everyone without distinction. It was enough that one be a human person, a son or daughter of the heavenly Father.

Jesus could accept a dinner invitation at the home of a leading Pharisee and rub elbows with his host's none too congenial friends.

He seems to have been a frequent guest at the home of the apparently well-to-do sisters, Mar-

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