

The basic unit of community

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

"Life has no better gift to give. Who could have deserved it?" was the comment of British writer C.S. Lewis on having friends.

A friend is someone who "helps us get beneath things that are easily said, down to our inarticulate hopes and wonderings...someone who listens to our dreams," said Dominican Father Paul Philibert, a theologian.

A friend is a "Band-Aid for our psychic lives, a quick fix when things go wrong," said theologian Theodore Hengesbach.

"When you cut yourself, you need the blood stopped right away, with no questions asked," said Hengesbach, who teaches at Indiana University in South Bend. Similarly, he said, a friend understands when "you need support, with no questions asked."

This is possible, because friends "have a shared vocabulary of words, gestures and body language" built up gradually over the years. He told about a reunion with his best friend of 20 years ago. "It was marvelous," Hengesbach said. Despite the years that intervened, it was "as if no time had elapsed."

Father Philibert considers friendship "extremely important"

for individuals at every stage of life. He is director of the Center for the Study of Youth Development at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

Friendship plays a vital role in helping people discover the meaning of life, the priest said. People don't grow up to automatically possess certain values. Instead, he explained, people notice what is valued by those they love. Adopting similar values "binds us together."

People are "made for community," the priest observed, and friendship is the basic unit of community. By sharing their dreams with others, people derive a great deal of energy as well as "a sense of direction."

Lewis wrote in a book titled "The Four Loves" that friendship comes through sharing a vision.

It is born when two people discover they have a common interest or taste or insight and "instantly they stand together."

Friendship is the instrument by which God reveals the beauties of other people to us, Lewis commented. He compared friendship to a feast where God has spread the table and presides.

Father Philibert suggested that friends fulfill a variety of roles for people. Some are especially talented at encouraging creativity. We turn to them when we are "on the brink of something exciting," Father Philibert said.

He remarked that his brother, an artist, always has people "hanging around him." The priest speculated that these people find their own creativity stimulated by that association. Creative friends have a knack of reassuring "us that what we want is worth" what is required.

Then there is the spiritual friend. This person listens to our late-night conversations and has the knack of inspiring us to get back on track, Father Philibert said. Such a friend reaffirms "that the dream is there even when all doesn't go well."

For adults, intensely preoccupied with their careers, friends offer the opportunity to relax. With friends, Father Philibert indicated, adults feel free to let aspects of their personalities emerge — aspects that are not related to their work; perhaps an ability as an athlete, or the ability to enjoy a social situation or to just have fun. This can be "a very liberating experience," he said.

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FOOD...

...for thought

The surgeon struggled through many years of study and hard work to establish himself in his chosen specialty. Finally he achieved success: His colleagues accepted him as an authority; patients invariably admired his work.

Still, in time, he became restless.

Though he enjoyed his work, he found that it didn't exhaust his interests. So he enrolled in a welding class. At the first session he introduced himself without mentioning he was a doctor.

Later, he explained that he had wanted the other class members to judge him strictly on his ability as a welder. Gaining recognition for this side of his personality was important to him, he said.

Was this doctor's action unusual?

According to Dominican Father Paul Philibert, probably not. He explained that people who have worked singlemindedly for success in a career often find themselves feeling somewhat stifled, somewhat one-dimensional. They can begin to feel isolated by their professions or careers. They fear that the only recognition they ever get is for their career achievements.

And this gives a clue to what people often seek from friends.

Father Philibert, who is director of the Center for the Study of Youth Development at The

Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., said friends can fulfill the happy role of appreciating and applauding the further dimensions of our personalities. In fact, it is with friends that people may feel free enough to explore untested talents and abilities.

A similar theme is discussed by Holy Cross Father Bernard Mullahy in a recent book titled "The Splendid Risk." (University of Notre Dame Press)

He writes: "Human friendship means mutual enrichment and constant growth." Friendship means having the capacity to reach out to others.

Father Mullahy finds that friendship "is a unique kind of relation and commitment," one that "has no strings attached." For the Holy Cross educator, friendship involves "a mutual sharing of life...in the sense of sharing with each other those aspects of life that can be shared and that the friends consider precious."

Friends will be open and available to each other, he adds. And friends love not simply one or two qualities in each other; they love each other as they are, as whole human beings.

This, says Father Mullahy, "calls for a constant act of faith and hope, a readiness to respect and respond to the wholeness and uniqueness of others."

...for discussion

1. When it comes to friends, what matters most to you?

2. In Monica Clark's article, a friend brings someone "back to life." The writer suggests that friends really can help to communicate life to each other. What does this really mean? Can people really share life, give life?

3. Why talk about friendship during Lent? Do you see this as a topic of particular interest for Christians involved in a journey of faith?

4. Father David K. O'Rourke thinks that a look at the friends of Jesus shows that the Lord was able to overcome barriers that otherwise would have divided his friends. And Father O'Rourke suggests that this tells people something about the Christian community today, and a role Jesus fulfills in that community. What does Father O'Rourke mean?

SECOND HELPINGS

"Lent: A Time for Making All Things New," by Ethel Marbach. This four-page publication provides practical suggestions for celebrating the Lenten season. Mrs. Marbach quotes Father Henri Nouwen in observing: "Jesus in no way wants us to leave our many-faceted world. He wants us to live in it, but firmly rooted in the center of all things. Jesus does not speak of a change of activities...nor even a change of pace. He speaks of a change of heart." Mrs. Marbach suggests people look for ways to give of their time, energy and privacy in helping others during Lent. (The Catholic Update series published by St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1615 Republic St. Cincinnati, Ohio 45210 1982 25-99 copies. \$20 each Annual subscription. \$5)

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tha and Mary. But he could also reveal in the rowdy company of a tax-collector's cronies.

It became apparent, as time went on, that Jesus preferred the company of the lowly and oppressed of society — so apparent, in fact, that the more respectable people were scandalized.

It is interesting to speculate about a Jesus who would have chosen his friends exclusively from the ranks of the rich and powerful. One almost shudders at the thought.

For his intimate friends, Jesus chose a nondescript group of very ordinary people: fishermen, a tax collector, a political agitator. And he urged his friends to become still more ordinary — as trusting as little children.