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Friendship and Evangelization in the Vincentian Tradition

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My reading over the years has tended to confirm the impression that the link between friendship and evangelization is not only biblical, it is a key to understanding the Vincentian charism and mission. In this article the "Little Method" will be used to examine the nature of the connection, together with the motives and means we have of fostering it.

I. Friendship and Evangelization in the New Testament Church

The New Testament community believed that there was a close connection between friendship in the community and evangelization. St Luke described the link in these words in Acts 4:32: "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need."

A number of comments can be made about these verses. Firstly, the opening one echoes the teaching of the Greeks, Jews and Romans on the nature of friendship. For example, in the 5th century B.C. Pythagoras founded a community of friends. It had four guidelines.

- Friends share in the perfect communion of a single spirit. Later Aristotle was to say that "friendship was one soul dwelling in two bodies."
- Friends share everything in common.
- Friends are equals and friendship is an indication of equality.
- A friend is a second self.¹

Perhaps the outstanding Old Testament passage on friendship in Sir 6:14-18 was influenced by Greek thinking after the conquest of Palestine by Alexander.² The

¹ Rosemary Radar, *Breaking Boundaries: Male/Female Friendships in Early Christian Communities*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 24.

friendship between David and Jonathan in 1 Sam 18:1-5 epitomized this ideal: "Jonathan became one spirit with David and loved him as himself... he swore eternal friendship for him. He took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, together with his armor and also his sword and his belt."

In the Roman era Cicero echoed the Greco-Jewish ideal to a certain extent when he wrote: "All I myself can do is to urge you to place friendship above every other human concern that can be imagined! Nothing else in the whole world is so completely in harmony with our nature.... Real friendship is more powerful than kinship; for the latter may exist without goodwill, whereas friendship can do no such thing.... It may be defined as a complete identity of feeling about all things in heaven and earth, an identity which is strengthened by mutual goodwill and affection. With the single exception of wisdom, I am inclined to regard it as the greatest of all the gifts the gods have bestowed upon mankind.... Moreover, it is to moral goodness that friendship owes its entire origin and character. Without goodness, it cannot even exist."³

It would probably be accurate to say that Luke was consciously and deliberately saying that, thanks to the transforming power of grace, the early Christians fulfilled these ancient ideals of friendship; i.e., unity of mind and heart expressed in a community of goods. Although some members of the early Christian Church may have been intimate friends, I do not think that Luke was implying that all the members were necessarily sharing their inmost thoughts and feelings with one another. They were one in mind and heart in so far as they were conformed to the mind and heart of Christ. St. Paul seemed to endorse this interpretation when he said in Phil 2:2, 5: "Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.... Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ." This ideal was echoed in many other New Testament epistles; e.g., Rm 15:5-6; 1 Cor 1:10; 1 Pt 3:8.

What is really significant is the fact that Luke inserted a verse about evangelization into the middle of a passage on community relationships; i.e., "With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them." What he seemed to be saying was this: friendly, loving relationships in the community and effective evangelization in the world were inextricably linked. This was true for a number of reasons.

- As the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus shows, the risen Jesus is experienced in the liturgical community where the members share their lives in the context of God's word and the breaking of bread (cf. Lk 24:13-36; Acts 2:42).

² James McEvoy, "Friendship and Love" in *Irish Theological Quarterly* (No. 1, Vol. 50, 1983/1984), 38-39.

³ *Laelius De Amicitia*, 4.15-5.19. In the 12th century, St. Aelred of Rievaulx was very much influenced by this treatise.

- As members of this community, the apostles _ like the disciples on the road to Emmaus _ had the desire and the power to witness to the resurrection of the Lord in an effective way. Their preaching of the kerygma was energized by the loving mercy they themselves experienced on a daily basis in the Christian fellowship.
- Not only that, the loving Christian community _ the body of Christ on earth _ was a living embodiment of the apostle's inspired preaching of the Good News, so that the hearts of those who heard it burned within them (cf. Lk 24:32) and enabled them to exclaim, "God is really among you" (1 Cor 14:25). As a result, more and more people joined the Christian community.

II. St. Vincent de Paul on Friendship in Community and Evangelization

Friendship has been valued throughout Christian history. It was a key theological construct in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. He used it to understand many subjects such as the Trinity, grace, contemplation, etc. Around the same time, St. Aelred of Rievaulx articulated the monastic ideal. In his classic work, *Spiritual Friendship*, he said: "God is friendship, it does sound strange does it not? And there is no authority for it in scripture, but I would not hesitate to attribute to friendship anything associated with charity, as for instance, "he who abides in friendship abides in God and God abides in him."⁴

In the 17 century, a number of French, Post-Tridentine reformers established long-lasting heterosexual friendships. For example, Jean Eudes was a friend of two women, Madame de Camilly and Marie des Vallees. Francis de Sales was a close friend of Jane de Chantal, founder of the Visitation order.⁵ His affectionate relationship with the latter influenced the sections of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* and the *Treatise On the Love of God* which are devoted to the subject of friendship love.⁶ The love shared by the Bishop and the widow expressed itself in many fruitful forms of evangelization. St. Vincent was aware of all this. It is significant that his only recorded vision affirmed and encapsulated his understanding of the bond that simultaneously united Francis and Jane to one another and to God. "There appeared to him a small globe of fire which rose from the earth to the upper regions of the air to be united with another globe which was larger and more luminous, and these two became one, mounting even higher, entering and being incorporated into yet another globe which was infinitely greater and more resplendent than the others."⁷

⁴ (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1977), 66; Aelred Squire, "God is Friendship," in *Aelred Of Rievaulx: A Study*, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1981), 98-111.

⁵ Cf., Elizabeth Stopp, Trans. & Ed., *St Francis de Sales: A Testimony by Jane de Chantal*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1967).

⁶ Wendy Wright, *Bond of Perfection: Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1985).

⁷ Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul*, Vol. 2, (New York: New City Press, 1993), 283.

Viewed in the light of this experience, it is not surprising that Vincent formed a close if not an intimate friendship with Louise de Marillac. Wendy Wright says that his relationship with Mademoiselle Le Gras, was "colored by a certain austere reserve reflective of his personality."⁸ That said, their collaboration was generative to an extraordinary degree. Together, they and their followers served and evangelized tens of thousands of poor people, both at home and abroad.

Vincent on community as friendship

Vincent's spiritual friendship with Louise taught him many things which he might not otherwise have learned. There is good reason to believe that it highlighted, in an experiential way, the important link between loving friendship in community and inspired and inspiring evangelization in society. In 1655 he said in an experimental version of the *Common Rules*: "Brotherly love should always be present among us, as well as the bond of holiness, and these should be safeguarded in every possible way. For this reason there should be great mutual respect, and we should get along *as good friends*, always living in community. We should particularly avoid exclusive friendships, as well as any sort of ostracism, as experience has shown that these give rise to factions and destroy Congregations."⁹

This ideal later found its definitive expression in the *Common Rules* of 1658 in Chapter 8, paragraph 2. Although Vincent was aware that individual confreres could form intimate friendships of the non-exclusive kind, he did not think that this would be the norm. What he had in mind was a oneness which was based on conformity to the mind and heart of Christ. For example, he said to eight confreres who were being sent to Ireland: "Be united together and God will bless you. But let it be in the love of Jesus Christ, for any other union will never be cemented by the blood of this Divine Savior and cannot last. It is therefore in Jesus Christ, by Jesus Christ, and for Jesus Christ, that you should be united to one another. The Spirit of Jesus Christ is a spirit of union and peace."¹⁰

Vincent said that friendship in the community would have a number of typical characteristics.

- *Friendliness or cordiality.* The two words seem to be virtually synonymous in Vincent's writings. By cordiality he meant emotional warmth. In 1658 he told the Daughters of Charity that friendliness/cordiality was the midpoint between two extremes, cold gloominess on the one hand, and an over demonstrative gushiness on the other. "Friendliness is, strictly speaking, the outward effect of charity in the heart. It springs from the heart and shows how glad you are to be with a particular sister.... It is joy felt in the heart when you see the person you love and it shows in

⁸ *Bond of Perfection*, 26.

⁹ John Rybolt C.M., Ed., "Codex Sarzana," in *Vincentiana* 33 (1991), 307-406.

¹⁰ SV XII, 487-488.

your face."¹¹ Speaking about the affective dimension of charity, Vincent said in 1659: "We have to let each other see that we really do love one another.... We should be prompt in letting others know of our affection, not at the wrong time or in the wrong way but at a suitable moment and in a suitable way, and not overdoing it."¹² There is nothing cold or dutiful about Vincent's conception of cordial relationships. On the contrary, he obviously believed that there should be real warmth of feeling informing community life.

□ *Gentleness and compassion.* It is clear that Vincent wanted community members to relate to one another in a gentle and compassionate way. He maintained that gentleness and forbearance were necessary in and outside of the community. "Gentleness," he said, "not only makes us excuse the affronts and injustices we receive, but even inclines us to treat with gentleness those from whom we receive them, by means of kind words."¹³ Speaking about the need for compassion, Vincent said in a conference on charity in 1659: "One of the effects of love is to enable hearts to enter into each other and feel what the other feels. This is far removed from the sort of people who have no feel for the pain of those who suffer or for the plight of the poor.... These duties of friendship have come down to us, coming from the roots of Christianity.... In line with this we ought to look on the misfortunes of others as our own."¹⁴

□ *Mutual respect.* A person has respect when he goes beyond appearances, to esteem and reverence another person, because he knows and believes that he or she is made in God's image and likeness and has been redeemed by the blood of Jesus. Speaking of the relationship between friendliness and respect Vincent said: "Just as respect without friendliness is not true respect, so friendliness without respect is not solid but will sometimes engender familiarities that are scarcely proper and will render friendliness thin and changeable, which will not happen if friendliness is joined to respect and respect to friendliness."¹⁵

□ *Love expressed in action.* Vincent said that affective love needs to find expression in effective action. In other words, the way we feel about the confreres should find expression in charitable deeds. For example, he stated in his conference on charity: "Having charity in the heart and saying so is not the end of the affair; it must be spread out into what we do; in that way it is perfect; it has an effect, since it stirs up love in the hearts of those who experience it; it conquers the world."¹⁶

¹¹ SV XII 274-275.

¹² SV XII, 192.

¹³ SV XII, 270-271.

¹⁴ Abelly, *op. cit.*, II, 166.

¹⁵ SV IX, 143.

¹⁶ SV XII 274.

Friendliness and Friendship Contrasted

In modern psychological writing a distinction is drawn between closeness and intimacy.¹⁷ Closeness is love experienced in feelings of warmth, affection, tenderness, esteem, etc. Intimacy goes beyond closeness by engaging in deep and honest communication of all one's thoughts and feelings. In these terms St. Vincent advocated closeness rather than intimacy, friendliness rather than friendship in community.

Research has indicated that, in practice, most men prefer closeness to intimacy. For example, the McGill report on *Male Intimacy* observes: "To say that men have no intimate friends seems on the surface too harsh, and it raises quick objections from most men.... However, only one man in ten has a friend with which he discusses work, money, marriage; only one in more than twenty has a friendship where he discloses feelings about himself."¹⁸

Research also shows that when a man does form an intimate relationship, it is usually with a woman. Sadly, intimacy between men is rare.¹⁹ So, much as they may be desirable, deep, non-exclusive friendships between confreres are the exception rather than the rule. However, some of us have formed friendships of this kind with people, both male and female, outside of the community.

In spite of the dangers and difficulties involved, these relationships can have many desirable benefits.²⁰ They can banish loneliness, energize one's spirits, protect celibacy, heal hurting memories, increase self-awareness, develop empathic skills and mediate the presence of God. St. Aelred of Rievaulx celebrated the fruits of these kinds of friendship in the *Mirror of Charity* when he wrote: "It is such a great joy to have the consolation of someone's affection _ someone to whom one is deeply united by the bonds of love, someone in whom our weary spirit may find rest, and to whom we may pour out our souls... someone whose conversation is as sweet as a song in the tedium of our daily life. He must be someone whose soul will be to us a refuge to creep into when the world is altogether too much for us; someone to whom we can confide all our thoughts. His spirit will give us the comforting kiss that heals all the sickness of our preoccupied hearts. He will weep with us when we are troubled, and rejoice with us when we are happy, and he will always be there to consult when we are in doubt. And we will be so deeply bound to him in our hearts that even when he is far away, we will find him together with us in spirit... as the grace of the Holy Spirit flows over you both. In this life on earth we can love a few people in this way, with heart

¹⁷ Thomas and Patrick Malone, "Balancing Closeness and Intimacy," in *The Art of Intimacy*, (London: Simon & Schuster Ltd., 1987), 25-29.

¹⁸ Quoted by Donna Tiernan Mahoney, *Touching the Face of God: Intimacy and Celibacy in Priestly Life*, (Boca Raton, Florida: Jeremiah Press, 1991), 104.

¹⁹ Cf. Daniel Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, (New York: Ballentine, 1978), 335; Lillian Rubin, *Intimate Strangers*, (London: Fontana, 1985), 129-131.

²⁰ See Pat Collins C.M., "Maturing as a Priest" in *The Furrow*, (November 1990), 605-615.

and mind together, for they are more bound to us by the ties of love than any others."²¹ As a result of friendships like these, affective and effective love flows out both to community members and the poor alike, in such a way that there is a congruence rather than a conflict between the different forms of affection in our lives.

²¹ Quoted by Aelred Squire, *Aelred of Rievaulx: A Study*, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 49-50.

Vincent on the connection between friendliness and evangelization

There are clear indications that St. Vincent related affective love in community to effective evangelization in the world, much as St. Luke had done. There were at least two ways in which this was true.

- Firstly, his God was, before all else, a God of compassion. It was out of love for suffering humanity that the Father sent his beloved Son. It was Jesus' compassionate love for the poor that motivated his preaching, works of charity, and deeds of power (cf. Mt 9:36). Vincentian missionaries will be motivated by the same compassion if they have first experienced this form of Christian love in community.
- Secondly, Vincent believed that unless there was unity of mind and heart in the community, united witness to Christ would be impossible. Speaking to the missionaries who were soon to depart to Ireland, he said: "How will we ever be able to draw souls together in Jesus Christ if you are not united among yourselves and with him? It will not be possible. Have then but one heart and one will. Otherwise you will be acting like horses who, when they are hitched to a chariot, pull some in one direction others in another, and thus they will spoil and ruin everything. God calls you to work in his vineyard. *Go then, as having one heart and one intention, and by this means you will produce fruit.*"²²

III. Today's Vincentians on the Connection between Friendship and Evangelization

There is agreement in the Congregation nowadays that the community exists in order to evangelize. For example, the 1980 version of the Constitutions states: "This fraternal life together, nourished continually by the mission, forms a community which promotes both personal and community good and renders the work of evangelization more effective."²³ In the recent book on the vows we read these striking words: "The following of Jesus can be understood and lived only in friendship and fraternal relationships. True fraternal communion supports the missionary in his response to the gift of celibacy which he has received. Community life should be a privileged space for expressing the affectivity that is part of everyone's life."²⁴

The same interrelationship was acknowledged in the charism statements which were produced in the three regions of the Irish Province in 1985. For example, the Dublin version stated: "We Vincentians are called to experience the gentle and

²² Abelly, *op. cit.*, II, 166.

²³ Quoted by John Rybolt C.M., "As Good Friends' Reflections on the development of the Concept of Fraternal Life in the Congregation of the Mission," in *Vincentiana*, (1994), 475-478.

²⁴ *Instruction on Stability, Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience in the Congregation of the Mission*, in *Vincentiana* (1996/1), 24.

compassionate love of Christ in community and to share that love with those to whom we are sent." Reverential compassion is the quality, *par excellence*, that needs to inform our community life, our friendships, and, *ipso facto*, our evangelization. It is clear in Lk 6:36-39 that three attitudes are alien to such loving-kindness: judgment, condemnation, and un-forgiveness. They weaken trust, quench affectionate love, and grieve the Holy Spirit. For cordiality to flourish, communities need to agree that they will abstain from these negative attitudes in thought and word. When they make such a covenant _ it might be stated in the community plan _ they create a zone of psychological safety where mutual trust gives rise to a growing spirit of freedom, joy and peace.

The 1986 *Lines of Action* paragraph 13, drew attention to some other barriers to cordiality in community:

- On occasion, excessive individualism or autonomy in decision making.
- A superficial way of living together that impedes our ability to listen and our respect for persons.
- There are, moreover, missionaries who live together without knowing each other well enough, without time to listen to one another, and who look outside the community for the dialogue and support that they do not find within it, or which they themselves fail to contribute to.
- At times the stress is placed on life in common and regularity without a genuine deepening of lived communion; this impedes the search for the prophetic dimension of community.²⁵

Cordiality in community is usually the result of the spontaneous and informal sharing that the confreres engage in. But as Robert Maloney C.M. has observed,²⁶ a good community plan can be a powerful tool in creating structures that foster Vincentian ideals, e.g., friendship in community. The following suggestions could be considered. They were proposed at the Irish Regional Meeting in 1996. Any of them could be included in a plan that intended to foster unity of mind and heart.

- *Reflection days.* For example, during Advent and Lent, where the confreres themselves give the conferences and/or homily.
- *Faith sharing.* This is a part of our patrimony. St. Vincent encouraged the confreres to engage in repetition of prayer. Nowadays we need to devise imaginative and creative ways of doing this. For example, a community could use the Benedictine *Lectio Divina* in order to prayerfully reflect on a designated piece of scripture. Afterwards they could share their insights and experiences. It can be incorporated into days of reflection and retreats, e.g., after the gospel has been read at the Mass.

²⁵ *Lines of Action, 1986-1992 and Other Documents*, 37th General Assembly, (Rome: Vincentian Publications, 1986), 40.

²⁶ "Community Living and the Community Plan," in *The Way of Vincent de Paul* (New York: New City Press, 1992), 130-141.

□ *Theological reflection.* It can be defined as follows: "It is that moment when our ministerial experience and theology, our personal faith and Tradition dialogue with one another."

It involves four stages.

- It begins with the ministerial experience, e.g., dealing with parents whose son committed suicide.

- It continues with an analysis of the experience, e.g., its socio-cultural setting.

- Then it proceeds to theological reflection: What theological issues are relevant to the experience? What does Tradition have to say about these issues? What do these issues have to say to the Tradition?

- Finally, it concludes by trying to see what the practical implications might be. What new insights, sensitivities, convictions, behaviors will be taken back to the experience as a result of the reflection process.²⁷

Some communities arrange to have one or two sessions like this each year. It takes time and effort to appreciate the purpose and methodology informing this kind of theological reflection.

□ *Homily preparation.* Some communities read the scripture texts for the following Sunday sometime early in the week. They prayerfully reflect on them, e.g., at morning prayer on Monday, and spend ten to fifteen minutes toward the end of the designated period, sharing their insights.

□ *Community conferences.* They can deal with community issues, e.g., how to handle conflict and anger in a constructive way; how to overcome barriers to trust; stress management, etc.

□ *Facilitated meetings.* Some communities arrange to have meetings, about twice a year, which focus specifically on community relationships. A trained and trusted facilitator is invited, with the community's consent, to spend an hour or two with the confreres. Each one is free to share how he *feels* about his life in the house. It gives each man an opportunity to speak about any negative emotions he may be experiencing, e.g., as a result of being hurt, annoyed, misunderstood, etc. Meetings of this kind can be painful, but they have a great ability to clear up misunderstandings and to deepen the bonds of unity.

□ *Prayer/liturgy.* Creative initiatives can enliven the spiritual life of the confreres, e.g., the weekly Vincentian-type prayer recommended by the Superior General.

□ *Recreation.* Confreres can devise imaginative ways of participating in community and inter-community activity, e.g., golf tournaments, dinners out, celebrating birthdays, jubilees, etc.

²⁷ Cf., "Guidelines for Theological Reflection," in *Guidelines for Pastoral Formation*, (Dublin: Irish Association for Pastoral Formation, 1991), 27.

Conclusion

I was fortunate to spend eight years as a member of the Irish Mission Team. That time on the road proved to me, if proof were needed, that the effectiveness of our efforts to evangelize were proportionate to the quality of our cordiality and unity. The extent to which we lived after the manner of dear friends was the extent to which we experienced zest and joy in our vocation. As a result, our cordial relationships tended to counteract loneliness, hardship, and discouragement. Many was the time when people told us during missions that the obvious unity and affection of the confreres not only edified them, it added real credibility to what we had to say. It seems that in our individualistic culture increasing numbers of people are longing for the comfort and consolation that only loving communities can provide. On one occasion, St. Vincent spoke about the joy that results from such relationships when he said to the Daughters of Charity in 1658: "St. Paul says in another place that whoever abides in charity has fulfilled the law.... Our Lord teaches forbearance.... It is a means of *establishing a holy friendship* among you and of living in perfect union, and in this way enabling you to make a paradise in this world; and therefore, if God gives you the grace to bear with one another, your life will be a paradise begun."²⁸ He echoed these sentiments when he said to the confreres in 1659: "If God gives this grace to the missionaries what is your opinion of the Company as a whole? Their life is a life of love, the life of the angels and the blessed, the earthly and the heavenly paradise."²⁹

If we live in unity of mind and heart, we will experience God's gentleness and compassion. We will, as a result, have the desire and the power to proclaim that same divine love in many effective ways while demonstrating its reality and attractiveness, by the manner in which we live together. As Ps 133:1, 3 says: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in *unity*!... For there the Lord has *commanded* his blessing."

²⁸ SV X 478.

²⁹ SV XII, 275.