



By Fr. Kevin Queally, TOR

Friendship with Christ and Being Franciscan

In my earliest days in the seminary – we’re talking the mid-1960s – there were many warnings against “particular friendships.” These were fair warnings about unhealthy or exclusive friendships, which could have happened. The point was well taken that we needed to be friendly to all our fellow seminarians and not be exclusive. However, at least in my experience, this concern got distorted into being a warning against all friendships! That in itself becomes unhealthy and sad. Friendships are often good and healthy, and can even help us to see and understand God’s unconditional love for us.

I was reflecting on all of this, when I came upon a passage from Saint Bonaventure, which he gave on the Feast of the Transferal of the Body of Body of Saint Francis, probably in 1267. (*Francis of Assisi, The Founder, Volume II, The Early Documents*) In this sermon Saint Bonaventure says: “*Jesus calls Saint Francis his friend for a number of special reasons.*” Saint Bonaventure enumerates four reasons: Francis’ truly humble spirit, his utter purity of heart, the serenity of his contemplative soul, and the marks of Christ’s cross imprinted on his body. Saint Bonaventure goes on to say: “*The word Friend, therefore, is addressed to Saint Francis, because he was a faithful, congenial and intimate friend of the Lord, conformed to him by the marks of the stigmata on his body.*”

In today’s society, the virtues that Saint Bonaventure enumerates, as being the reasons for Francis’ intimacy with Christ, are not encouraged. We must struggle mightily to learn what a truly humble spirit is and how to become like that. Indeed, the “*We’re Number 1*” attitude, whether it be about our own fraternity or country, is destructive to the truly humble spirit. I am NOT saying that we cannot love our own country. (I do!) I am saying that it cannot exclude the love of others, even enemies. Otherwise, it departs from the love that Christ teaches us.

Saint Bonaventure ascribed the virtue of purity of heart to Saint Francis. Talk about a virtue not encouraged by society today. Look at one of the major television networks for any period of time and it is clear that today’s society does not value purity of heart. So what must we do? Growing closer to

Christ is not easy. We need to be vigilant constantly concerning our spiritual life. It is important to evaluate what we watch, read and hear.

Saint Francis was a contemplative and this serenity of his soul made his intimate friendship with Christ possible. How can we become more and more contemplative in our world today? Very often we are surrounded by noise. Many of us keep the television or radio going, just as background noise? How many of us seek out and enjoy silence in our day? Many of us cannot bear to be alone, not realizing that there is a difference between being alone and being lonely. It is good for us to constantly renew and re-evaluate our prayer, making sure that we are not only telling God our needs, but that we are also listening to God and trying to discern His will. I read recently, that we cannot listen to God, if we are always talking to God. How true!

God is indeed speaking to us in many ways. The Scriptures are, of course, our primary source. Additionally, we can hear God’s voice in the Church’s teachings, in the events of our lives, in historical events and trends, and especially when we are quiet in prayer.

The source and center of our spiritual life is the Eucharist. In this year dedicated to the Eucharist, we are very conscious of many aspects of the Eucharistic life of the Church. Today, I center on listening to Christ, as we grow closer to him in the Eucharist. This is the place where our friendship with Christ can be most intimate. He is with us, uniting us to each other in the congregation and all the Church. We ARE His Body, the Church. He acts in the world through us.

The final reason Saint Bonaventure gave had to do with the Stigmata. Much of Saint Francis’ deep love for Christ had to do with the Passion of Christ. He was so amazed that God could love each of us so much that he was willing to send His Son to die for us. Our own sufferings and burdens unite us to Christ in his Passion. With Francis, we must embrace our crosses and walk in Christ’s footsteps. The paradox is that doing all of this frees us and gives us joy. (In case you haven’t noticed, one hallmark of the Franciscan is joy!)

Our friendship with Christ is meant to grow, and the Eucharist certainly is the way to intimacy with Christ. With Saint Francis as our mentor, we can model his love for Christ in the Eucharist and work on the virtues we need to always follow Christ faithfully in the same way Francis did! Sisters and brothers, let us begin, for up to now we have done *little*.