

## Understanding Religious Friendship in the Light of John 15:15

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### **Abstract**

It is true that man is a being with others in the society in which he or she lives. Man cannot do without relationship and more deeply without friendship. Friendship is a good thing when people enter it for the sake of the good. We can also say that man is a dialogical being. He cannot do without communication; this is a fundamental character of friendship. Friendship brings him or her more closely to the other than being people living in the same environment or neighbourhood. Communalism is an idea which defines the unity and togetherness in life than individualism, living alone and separate from the relationship with others. Living in common is very vital to religious communities and lives. Friends are people who love each other, like each other, respect and honour each other. Friendship is the state of being friends. Like loving, people enter into friendship because of various motives. The goal determines why people enter into friendship. To be a wonderful community, Religious must see beyond being members living under the same rules, to seeing themselves as friends. To have a deeper working relationship, Jesus Christ called His disciples friends.

**Key words:** Religious, Friendship, Friend, Community, Love, Utility, Pleasure, Good.

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### **1.0 Introduction**

*“I do not call you servants any longer, because servants do not know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends, because I have told you everything I heard from my Father,”* (John 15:15).

Fundamental to the religious life is the communality and the communion that exists within the community. Living in common, cooperation, unity, and resources sharing among others are definitive elements in religious communities. In such a way of life, no one does it alone, have it alone, use it alone or live alone. It is one thing to be a member of the community, and another thing to be friends within the same community. Being members of a congregation or a religious community does not necessarily make them friends. Friendship is another level in which individual members enter into communion

with one another. The positive expression of one's inner thoughts, secrets, emotions, feelings, desires and aspirations can be seen as some essential elements of friendship within a religious community. We know that community living is defined by rules, which all members must adhere to. Here, members may try to live the rules to "fulfill all righteousness" (Mathew 3:15), but deep within them there is no that personal connectivity and openness toward each other. Our co-existence as members of a community *ipso facto* enables us to relate at the level of community members. The congregation or religious community is the mother who gave birth to all professed or ordained members of the community. But the question remains; what is the degree of our openness and connectivity towards each other is? Does my interest in the congregation, etc affects or regulates my relationship with other members? Does my interest allow me to see each member as a friend? These questions are necessary because individual persons joined a congregation a diocese to live in service to God and humanity according to the *charisma* (Jacob and Ilan, 2022) of the congregation which considered them suitable. But as one becomes a member, individual interest begins to play in different directions: I want to be Rector, Provincial, and General or any other position in the congregation or diocese in the future, thereby chosen who to be loyal, respecting, loving or not to etc. To such members with self interest, obedience to the way of life of the congregation in general, suffers in the hand of loyalty to individual who pretentiously do so to win positions. In this paper, we shall be reflecting on Religious Friendship in the Light of John 15:15: we shall briefly look at the definition of friendship and the understanding of friendship as it concerns members of a Religious Communities; discussing on the various types of friendship, then we shall consider the characteristics of Religious friendship, then we shall end our reflection with a concluding note.

## 2.0 Religious Friendship

The word Religious pertains to a conscientious and pragmatic aspect of religion (*Webster's Encyclopedia*). It could also be the ways in which religion is practiced (Dawson, 2013). "Religious action" is a powerful tool to the sustainability of the religious life. Religious life is the participation of the being of that religion. However, the rise of Monasticism in the early century of Christianity and the pre-medieval era, and the needs for missionaries gave rise to different groups within the Church who sought to follow Christ closely through the spiritual character of a founder (*Encyclopedia Britannica, 2002*). Therefore, religious in a broader perspective can be seen to be the practice or living religion in a certain manner under a particular ways of life. Friendship, on the other hand is "the state of being friends (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 2017*)." The word friend has its etymology from the Old English, *Freon*, which connotes the verb to love, to like and to honour (*Ibid*). The Latin *Fratre* (meaning, brother) actually takes its name from *Freon*. The same with the words friar or confrere (brother), also have their roots in *Freon* (*Ibid*). With this understanding, we can say that brotherhood carries in it the element of friendship. Friendship means being attached to another (brother) intimately by esteem and affection (*Ibid*). It is

simply living in love with one another in a more unique and distinct manner. It must be noted that only friends *ab initio* can be in friendship. If I am not your friend (you are not mine), then we cannot be in a state of friendship of a sudden. We have to be friends before we can establish friendship. Friendship is the journey of friends.

Religious friendship, therefore, can simply be seen as the state in which members of a religious community or order sharing common rules, beliefs, practices and values have, deeper and meaningful connection between themselves in the Spirit of Christ's love, which is characterised by their free expressions of feelings, emotions, desires, aspirations, anxieties, worries, pains and sorrow without fear of falling apart or being used against one another. Religious friendship dispels the darkness of religious pretentiousness. For those members who cling to one another in hope for something, St. Thomas Aquinas has this to say, "It is wrong to hope in man as though he were the principal author of salvation, but not, to hope in man as helping us ministerially under God. In like manner, it would be wrong if a man loved his neighbor as though he were his last end, but not, if he loved him for God's sake; and this is what charity does." (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Q25). Friendship is something ideal for rational beings. We cannot reasonably cling to life without friends. Aquinas went further to elaborate, "not every love has the character of friendship, but that love which is together with benevolence (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II, II Q23)." Again, "neither does well-wishing suffice for friendship, for a certain mutual love is requisite, since friendship is between friend and friend: and this well-wishing is founded on some kind of communication. Accordingly, since there is a communication between man and God, inasmuch as He communicates His happiness to us, some kind of friendship, therefore, must be based on this same communication. The love which is based on this communication is charity: wherefore it is evident that charity is the friendship of man for God (Ibid)."

### 3.0 The Various Types of Friendships

Prior to Aquinas, Aristotle has discussed elaborately on question of friends and friendship. For him, friendship is that bond, which holds or binds people together. Friendship is intrinsically noble. And where men or people are friends, there is no need for justice (Wheel, 1951), because true friends act justly towards each other. He asserts that "friendship is a kind of natural affection, such as exists instinctively in a parent toward its young, and in an offspring toward its parent (Ibid)." Aristotle postulated three (3) different types or kinds of friendship.

**3.0.1 Friendship of utility:** This is a kind of closeness or *philesis* (affection) that makes people to be friends (*philein*) for the sake of perceived benefits to be derived in each other (Ibid). Each likes the other not for the sake of who he is in himself, but for the sake of the benefit one can get from the friendship. This kind of friendship is parasitic in nature. This idea may not

be farfetched in a community of religious persons. Deep within the conscience, one knows the motives in which one becomes so attached to the other. I am close to him, because of the favours I intend to get from him. Aside that, nothing else! In this kind of friendship, there are no common grounds for mutual benefits. Rather, one eyes from the other what he will get in the end. Until the benefit or the end is achieved, the means in not justified. This form of friendship is selective and materially inclined. It is very important to ask ourselves that in the community of brethren, why am I attached to "A" and not "B?" And the response may be that "A" has and can give what "B" cannot. In this situation, it is because of what "A" has that I chose him for a friend. For people with this perception, they can sale their dignity and respect for the sake of what they can get; they can sacrifice obedience on the altar of pretentious loyalty; they can betray a colleague or a member before authorities for the sake of a favour. Such individuals have mastery of lies, gossip, and false witness.

**3.0.2 Friendship based on Pleasure** (Wheel, 1951): like the above discussion, this kind of friendship is established with the goal of having some pleasurable satisfaction. Members go into this friendship not for the sake of who the other is in them but because they merely entertain them with their conversation, sense of laughter, dance, etc. This kind friendship has the element of *eros* when discussing the various types of love. Friendship by utility and pleasure is inferior and in a secondary sense, *kata symbebekos*. Because it is a friendship that takes advantage of the other for self-satisfaction, it does not last and easily dissolves. They cease to be friends when they are no longer useful and pleasurable to each other. In the community of brethren, the attachments or closeness each other will stop because it is no longer beneficiary. For Aristotle, it is not a noble way of establishing friendship. Such kind of friendship passes like a smoke and is no more. Utility and pleasure are nothing permanent, but varies from time to time, and when the motive of the connection is destroyed, then the friendship ceases, since it has existed on those ladders (Ibid).

**3.0.3 Friendship for the sake of the good:** the third category of friendship is what Aristotle called "perfect (*teleios*) friendship (Ibid)." It is between two good people, whose respective virtues serve as a common bond. Here, a virtuous character defines the connection. This is noble. I am close to you not because I want position from you (in authority), but because of who you are in person. In a community of such minded friends, the good of each other is wished. And this goodness is not in utility or pleasure, but in each essential character. For Aristotle, "wishing good to one's friend for his own sake is what constitutes friendship in the truest sense, where each loves the other for what he is in himself, not in some secondary respect (Ibid)." Friendship for the sake of the good is lasting as long as friends remain good in character. The good actions of one are identical or similar to the other because all of them always conceive the good of the other.

Being attached to one another without recourse to region, tribe, background status, etc, but for who the person is good friendship. Here, friends made know to each other their personality, secrets, emotions, desires, feelings, thoughts and aspirations about life and the community without fear of being betrayed by the other. Such friendships are not common because good and trustworthy people are not easily found in the society.

#### 4.0 Religious Friendship in the Light of John 15:15

*I do not call you servants any longer, because servants do not know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends, because I have told you everything I heard from my Father.* This is a paradigm shift from being members of a group to being close shareholders with the master. Jesus Christ changed the status of His followers from being disciples to friends. The word *doulos* connotes both servant and slave. But in the Johannine context it is more appropriate to a slave. And *philos* denotes friends and close associates (Raymond, 1970). It is very clear in the text and in normal situation that in the servant-master relationship, the servant does not have the right to a deeper understanding of the master's in and out of his business. He is simply to follow and carry out orders. However, since he is an apprentice, when set free, then he will learn other ways of doing the business as experience records itself. But Jesus calls His disciples friends (*philos*), which also means beloved, because He has made known to them all the top secrets that they need to know about His Father. Such kind of revelation cannot be possible if there is no love in play. They have become friends not because He wants to benefit from them or derive some amusements from their company, but He called them friends for who they are in themselves. This is an incarnated identity; Let me put words in the mouth of Christ by saying, *I am one with you, you deserve to know everything about my Father, about me and my mission among you.*

Religious friendship must be seen as a friendly journey with each member of the community. Every member is indispensable. Community members must put themselves in the same foothold, knowing fully that "equality is the principal tenet of friendship (Charles, 2024)." Friendship in itself affords us the freedom to speak openly to each other in private and in public; it guarantees "privacy from eavesdroppers (Ibid)." Where you are today, someone was there yesterday, and someone still will take your place tomorrow. Religious friendship must radiate a deeper awareness and communion in the community. As members, we can't be figures without knowing the *modus operandi* of the community or congregation. In some institutions and parishes, for example, the vicars do not have access to information for him to know what is happening in the community or congregation; the vice president is not carry along the lines of the president's activities. Imagine an emergency happens with the Head and the Deputy is not exposed to the system, how will administration flows without hitches? Probably we will be left with no option than to hire people to come and fix things for us. The truth is that we are priests by ordination, and religious by

the profession of the Evangelical Counsels, but in real sense of the word, we are not friends! Jesus Christ, being the shepherd provided His sheep with all the necessary information that is needed to work with after His ascension.

Jesus' friendship style is indeed friendship for the sake of the good of the persons He has chosen. "You did not choose me; I chose you and appointed you to go and bear much fruit, the kind of fruit that endures (John 15:16)." He chose them and instead of making them servants or slaves, He made them His beloved friends, and empowered them with all the information they need for the mission ahead. For it is clear, "*nemo dat quot non habet*" (no one gives what he does not have). The friends of Jesus could only give from what they received from their Lord and Master who has humbled Himself to becoming one with them. Our openness and closeness to one another indicate the compass that connects us to Christ in a closer union. Love all brothers for the sake of Jesus Christ, but love Christ for His own sake. Thomas A. Kempis tells us, "Jesus Christ alone is to be loved in a special way, because He alone is the best and most faithful of all friends (Kempis, 2001)." Friendship is beyond rules. It is something we personally establish.

### 5.0 Characteristic of Religious Friendship

Religious friendship can be characterised by theological virtues of "faith, hope and love (CCC, Nos. 1814-1829" and the day-to-day attitudes of respect for the dignity of the human person, mutual confidence, genuine love, trust, openness to one another, spiritual support and encouragements, prayers, equality; it promotes the sense of belongingness, emotional support, and understanding, dispels racial tendencies; it is open to accountability and transparency toward all members, it upholds congregational and community values and beliefs as well. It will not be out of place to bring in as the features of religious friendship the four cardinal virtues of "prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance (Ibid, No. 1805)." These human virtues are proper to people who have become friends for the sake of the good. As it is clear, "the virtuous man is he who freely practices the good (Ibid, No. 1804)." True and genuine friends within the religious community are those who, *come rain, come sunshine* remain in love as the true virtue that has the capacity to endure all things and that last forever.

### 6.0 Conclusion

Having come this far, it is very clear that community life offers opportunities for members coming from different background and culture to relate with each other. This relationship is necessary based on the rules governing the attitudes and behaviours of members. Nevertheless, there is another form of relatedness, which takes members to another degree of communion, the relationship of friendship. Religious friendship, if lived by all in the Spirit and teachings of our Lord will strengthen the common bond that exists in the community. Religious friendship can be a powerful tool for transformation within the congregation. Real friendship is built on the foundation of mutual love and respect for one another.

In true religious friendship the question of *who is who* does not erect its head high. Friendship in itself does not speak about age, position, region, race, colour, sex, intellectual capacity, talent, etc. friends are normally equal before one another, there is no senior friend and there is no junior friend. A friend is a friend. True religious friendship is to see ourselves in each other. We are born for communion. Our Lord calls us friends for this reason, life of communion. Genuine friendship is a divine call. It means therefore, that our connection to each other should make us to be connected more to Jesus Christ. As the Lord would not want the disciples to be looking at Him with the eyes of a Lord or Master, so too, we must make each other have the sense of being a true friends to each other. As members of a community, are you a genuine friend to one and all for the sake of the good?

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