

# ON AN ULTIMATE PARADIGM & AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF FRIENDSHIP

## INTRODUCTION

A paradigm can be said to be “an example serving as a model.” If we have models A, B, C, D, E – a more dominant model can serve as a paradigm, or F can serve as an umbrella standing over ABCDE which is included in the grouping, but can act as a filter through which all six of the models can be understood. A paradigm is like a “key” that unlocks a deeper understanding of a particular idea, concept or reality. Logically speaking there can be groups of paradigms which cover a great many categories of reality; but perhaps, there can also be an ultimate paradigm, by which all of the other paradigms and models can be understood. I am proposing that “friendship” might be such an ultimate paradigm.

Simply speaking: before anything else, there was God. Then to “house” his most valued of all creation: humankind, God created the array of the universe with all of laws, wonders, design, structure, codes and purposes – all in order to benefit and serve the man and the woman whom he created in his own image and likeness, and their descendants.

Everything then is centered on the relationship between God and the man and the women (and their descendants). Again, at the very beginning, *when* God created man and woman in his image and likeness, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (#396) “God created man in his image and established him in his friendship. A spiritual creature, man can live this friendship only in free submission to God...Man is dependent on his Creator and subject to the laws of creation and to the moral norms that govern the use of freedom!”

To make the long story short: the man and the woman misused the freedom, and thereby destroyed the friendship between themselves and God, and themselves with each other, and the children they would have.

Man could not restore the friendship – only a God-Man could do that...only Jesus could do that – by an act of supreme obedience to the Father’s will

(his death on the Cross for us and the forgiveness that Original sin and all our own personal sins). Jesus founded the Church to be his living, forgiving, healing, reconciling presence in the world for all ages until the end of time. Being God's friendship in the Flesh, Jesus and the Church are all about the restoration of the original state of friendship which existed in the Garden of Eden.

My proposition is that the concept of friendship being entirely God's idea and the purpose for our relationship with him (and with one another) in the first place – can be the grand paradigm – the filter by which all reality is viewed, understood and translated into the action of loving regard and service among friends.

Everyone is looking to the “bottom line” of reality? Everyone at one point or another has asked themselves – who am I? Why am I alive? What is life all about? What happens when I die? I propose that beginning with the concept of Divine Friendship – everything else will fall into place!

And among the things that will fall into place is an understanding of the Church as a *communion of friendship*! This is the essence of this essay!

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It was St. Augustine, one of the first and most prominent doctors and Fathers of the Church – living the 4<sup>th</sup> century – who said: “Our hearts are restless, Lord, until they rest in thee!” These few words summarize a longing in the human heart and soul that will never be completely and fully satisfied for anyone who lives on this earth. It is only after passing through the portal of death that we will find the true fullness of peace and joy that we are searching for – sometimes so desperately – here below!

Following up from my last essay – ON CHASTE BODIES AND PURE MINDS: FRIENDSHIP – I propose in this essay to locate an enormous aid for human beings in making the journey through an unfulfilled life to the promised experience which is beyond all imagining!

The Catholic Church, founded by Jesus Christ, is the fullest expression of the complete story of God's relationship with mankind – which began with the “institution of friendship” as the primary relationship that he wanted to have with us, and for us to have with each other – and which will end with the amalgamation of all friends into one eternal friendship in the Person of Jesus Christ: FRIEND! It is only then that mankind will once again be fully restored to its original and proper relationship with God: we will exist in him: we will exist in FRIENDSHIP forever!

And so: I propose here an “ecclesiology of friendship!” – albeit a sketchy outline of such an ecclesiology. [An “ecclesiology” is a ‘*theological* study of the Church’]

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It would seem that the Church was instituted from the start as a “community of friends” – or better yet, a “communion of friends.” The Church is the living organism which is the Body (and Blood) of Christ – who is *God's-Friendship-Become-Flesh*. Therefore, to study the Church is to study “friendship.”

In short: Jesus came to us as God's Friendship, as God's Friend to restore the broken friendship that began to exist when Adam and Eve rejected the fatherhood of God, and chose rather to set themselves up as their own totally independent creatures: they wanted to be their own “father,” “provider,” “friend.” What they soon realized, though, was that they did not know how to be their own father, provider and friend. Cut off from the source they began to experience the exact same distress, fears and isolation that we all still feel to some extent. Adam and Eve and their descendants were in deep trouble! And no matter what they did they soon concluded that they could not restore the original relationship with God: they could not “save” themselves. All seemed pretty hopeless. Life away from God and his graces, life “on our own,” life as “free-spirits” having no ties to the Spirit who makes all things work and work out: always leads to “death”: both physical death, and spiritual death! Something drastic needed to be done!

God the Father – the real Father – the loving Father – the merciful Father – set a plan into motion to “intervene” into man's pitiable history that he was making for himself: and to really and truly, once and for all: SAVE him from

himself – and restore him to the original sonship, providence and friendship that he had lost! Since God was “offended” – only God could repair the damage; since man was the “offender” – only Man could attempt reconciliation: a GOD/MAN was the only solution: and that was to be none other than JESUS: Son of God, Son of Man!

And so, God’s FRIENDSHIP – the Second Person of the Trinity – his Son – was sent to BE the God/Man who would restore the Original Friendship and to invite the whole world to the eternal realization of LIFE-IN-FRIENDSHIP forever: life in JESUS, life in GOD! It was an amazing plan!

It was on that cold and starry night, then, in Bethlehem that the Light of God’s Friendship was born in a cave while shepherds watched their flocks and angels sang: Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth to those who are God’s Friends!

The entire life, both private and public, of Jesus spoke of nothing but his and his Father’s gift of friendship, and the real possibility now of the age-old broken friendship between God and Man to be healed and restored! It was a very exciting time for those who had so long waited for this very event!

One of Jesus most dramatic sayings was: “There is no greater love...than to lay down one’s life for one’s friend!” This is a very short sentence: but the ramifications of it are long indeed! Jesus by freely laying down his life for us (who were even considered at that time still “enemies” of God and himself) would reestablish the cherished, venerable and most sacred relationship that can be: the relationship of friendship between God and mankind! Again, this sentence is so short and even a bit melodramatic: but it is of the essence of Jesus entire life! The Cross was not only the instrument of Death: the forgiveness of sins, the possibility of entrance into everlasting life – it is also the preeminent Sign of FRIENDSHIP RESTORED! When we look at a crucifix we should cry out: Thank you, FRIEND, JESUS! Thank you for doing that for ME, for US!

Also during his public ministry Jesus told his disciples: “you are my friends if you do what I command you!” And Jesus would never command us to say or do anything that was not his Father’s will: for Jesus always does the will of the Father – freely and lovingly and joyfully! And so, as we try to incorporate the teachings of Jesus into our lives – and literally “do as he bids us” – then we too can feel the same freedom, the same love and the

same joy! This freedom, love and joy and the basic elements of the activity of friendship! Therefore, when we are friends to others – based on our belief that Jesus is our Friend – our life on earth becomes that much more peaceful – and we have a “sign” that maybe St. Augustine was correct: and that the fullness of the sign, the fullness of the peace is to be reserved for eternity. However, it is wonderful to be able to experience it to some degree here below.

The Church, therefore, as I propose, is but the extension of the life of Jesus and his friendship – present, until the end of time! “Lo, I am with you always, until the end of the world.” Everything about the Church speaks of this enduring, empowering friendship!

On the mount of the Ascension Jesus tells his Apostles (and their successors) to go into the whole world and proclaim the Good News: to Baptize and to assure people that he, himself, personally would be with them until the end of time! This, then, is a direct command by the commander-in-chief to “go and tell about the restoration of FRIENDSHIP!” and to experience all of the ramifications that go with it – beginning with Baptism as a front-door passage for getting in line with the Friendship!

It was 10 days later – on Pentecost – that the Holy Spirit rushed upon the Church – the Holy Spirit which is the Friendship between the Father and the Son! The “communion of friends” – the “Church” was born – and incorporation into its life is the most important thing any human being can do! For it is the life of Life! It is the light of Light! It is the friendship of Friendship! All of these will last forever – and they can begin now for those who will accept and believe that it exists and can happen! As for the rest: death, darkness and isolation awaits!

The Church then ought to be viewed as a living organism, a living Body, the very Body of Christ himself of which its members are but living cells! The Church is not an organization or an institution or a corporation! The Church is the Person of Jesus Christ! The Church is God’s-Friendship-In-The-Flesh present until the end of time and beyond!

As we just mentioned above – none of this can make any sense at all to anyone unless true belief, and faith and action are involved! It is specifically designed that way. Belief must be a free-will operation of the individual to be valid. The act of faith is ultimately an act of love, and an act of hope – but among them the act of faith and hope in action: love: true charity is the most valued! The activity of the Church, the activity of Friendship is based on love, and God is Love!

In setting up his Church not only did Jesus appoint leaders, but he also set up a sign/system so that we can recognize his presence in our midst. These signs are called sacraments: for, in addition to being simply signs, they also really make present and active what they signify. Christ established seven of these signs / sacraments – and they are all about the Friendship!

**BAPTISM** – make us friends of God once again – this is an astounding simple fact – it also makes adopted sons and daughters – equally astounding! It also gifts us with the supernatural power of faith, hope and charity.

**CONFIRMATION** – gifts us with Divine Gifts of Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Knowledge, Piety, Fortitude and Fear of the Lord so that we can truly be loving friends with our fellow Christians and indeed with the whole world.

**EUCCHARIST** – is the gift of Jesus of his very self – his very Body and Blood – It is bread of angels; bread of friendship-restored! It is spiritual nourishment for spiritual life! It is his Real Presence among us until the end of time!

**PENANCE** – is the way to restore broken friendship with God (and the Church) (sin) – after Baptism. Maintaining a vibrant and healthy relationship of friendship with God and one another ought to be the most important task of our lives!

**ANOINTING THE SICK** – is the assurance that God's friendship is ever close to the sick and the dying – they are never alone in their

suffering because Jesus thought about them in their exact situations while he hung dying on the Cross – and his Death transformed their suffering into victory!

**HOLY ORDERS** – is the vehicle by which God's friendship is freely distributed to the members of the Church – according to the wishes of Jesus, by the working of the Holy Spirit through his priests

**MARRIAGE** – is a special sign of God's love and friendship with all of mankind – it is the context and environment for young members of family and Church to learn all about how to be a friend!

The sacramental life of the Church, therefore, is all about friendship! The task of preaching and teaching is also about the friendship! If anything that is preached or taught does not in some way relate to the primordial relationship of friendship – friendship between God and mankind, mankind among itself – then chances are it is not accurate.

One thing that is entirely preserved in the whole process of redemption and salvation and the sacramental life of the Church is the freedom of the children of God – the freedom that each has to rightly and correctly use the amazing gift of “free will” that God the Father has given us all! God freely gave his friendship in the first place, it was freely accepted; but then it was sadly rejected. The restoration of the friendship being completed by the Death / Resurrection of Christ still requires our free adherence. It is there for the receiving once again – but we must choose it! Then, once chosen, we must daily “re-choose” it, decide for it, receive it until our last breath – otherwise we shall surely lose it...we may gain the whole world (by means of counterfeit ‘friendships’ of all kinds) but we will lose our selves, our souls and our lives forever!

In addition then to plugging oneself into the Church – our only sure hope – we need to maintain our membership in it by partaking of the sacraments, listening to the preaching and teaching, but then “putting them into practice!” A constant companion throughout each day ought, therefore, to be the monastic injunction to “pray and work!” Pray – stay in constant contact with Jesus our best of all possible Friends; and then carry on the

“work of being a friend” to all we meet – especially according to the “work, vocation” that God knows best is for us – his “secret task(s)” that he wants accomplished through us – that only we can do!

**The Church, then, when all is said and done** – can be considered **friendship in action!** Divine, supernatural, Spirit-filled and directed – friendship-in-action!

Faith is necessary to grasp any of the contents of this essay; for the faithless, it will be impossible to understand – but they must remember that the “light of God’s Wisdom” is a gift from God that they simply can ask for! They will certainly know if / when God answers!

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“O Wisdom of our God”

- This is certainly not a complete ecclesiology, but it is a start!

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