

# The Friendship of Christ

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Friendship of Christ

**By Fr. Robert Hugh Benson**

*Authored in the year of Our Lord, 1912*

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## The Friendship of Christ (General)

GEN. II: 18

THE emotion of friendship is amongst the most mighty and the most mysterious of human instincts. Materialistic philosophers delight in tracing even the most exalted emotions -- art, religion, romance -- to purely carnal sources; to the instincts of the propagation or sustentation of physical life; and yet in this single experience at any rate -- when we class together, as we can, all those varied relationships between men and men, women and women, as well as between men and women, under the common title of friendship -- materialistic philosophy wholly breaks down. It is not a manifestation of sex, for David can cry to Jonathan "Thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women"; it is not a sympathy arising from common interests, for the sage and the fool can form a friendship at least as strong as any between two sages or two fools; it is not a relationship based on the exchange of ideas, for the deepest friendships thrive better in silence than in speech. "No man is truly my friend," says Maeterlinck, "until we have each learned to be silent in one another's company."

And this mysterious thing is as mighty as it is mysterious. It is bound to rise, so far as it is true to the laws of its own development, to a pitch of passion far beyond that of ordinary relations between the sexes. Since it is independent of those physical elements necessary to a love between husband and wife, it can rise mysteriously higher in certain respects, than the plane which those elements sustain. It

seeks to win nothing, to produce nothing -- but to sacrifice all. Even where the supernatural motive is apparently absent, it can reflect on the natural plane, even more clearly than does sacramental wedded love, the characteristics of divine charity. On its own plane, it also "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things . . . seeketh not her own . . . is not puffed up."<sup>1</sup> It is the salt of perfect matrimony, but it can exist without sex. It takes its place with those other supreme departments of human experience -- art, chivalry and even religion -- and it is not the least noble of the company.

On the other hand, there is hardly any experience more subject to disillusionment. It deifies beasts, and is disappointed to find them human after all. When my friend fails me at a crisis or when I fail my friend, there is hardly any bitterness in life so bitter. And, again; while friendship itself has an air of eternity about it, seeming to transcend all natural limits, there is hardly any emotion so utterly at the mercy of time. We form friendships, and grow out of them. It might almost be said that we cannot retain the faculty of friendship unless we are continually making new friends: just as, in religion, in proportion as we form inadequate images and ideas of the divine which for the time we adore, and presently change for others, we progress in the knowledge of the True God. I cannot retain true Childhood unless I am continually putting away childish things.

Here then is one of the more princely passions which, while feeding upon earthly things are continuously dissatisfied with them; which, themselves white-hot, are never consumed -- one of the passions that make history, and therefore look always to the future and not to the past -- a passion which, perhaps above all others, since in its instance

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1. I Cor. xiii.

it is impossible to resolve it into earthly elements, points to eternity only for the place of its satisfaction, and to the Divine Love for the answering of its human needs. There is but one intelligible explanation then for the desires which it generates yet never fulfils; there is but one supreme friendship to which all human friendships point; one Ideal Friend in whom we find perfect and complete that for which we look in type and shadow in the faces of our human lovers.

I. It is at once the privilege and the burden of Catholics that they know so much of Jesus Christ. It is their privilege, since an intelligent knowledge of the Person and the attributes and the achievements of Incarnate God is an infinitely greater wisdom than all the rest of the sciences put together. To have a knowledge of the Creator is incalculably a more noble thing than to have a knowledge of His Creation. Yet it is a burden as well; for the splendour of this knowledge may be so great as to blind us to the value of its details. The blaze of the Divinity to him who sees it may be so bright as to bewilder him with regard to the humanity. The unity of the wood vanishes in the perfection of the trees.

Catholics then, above all others, are prone -- through their very knowledge of the mysteries of faith, through their very apprehension of Jesus Christ as their God, their High Priest, their Victim, their Prophet and their King -- to forget that His delights are to be with the sons of men more than to rule the Seraphim, that, while His Majesty held Him on the throne of His Father, His Love brought Him down on pilgrimage that He might transform His servants into His friends. For example, devout souls often complain of their loneliness on earth. They pray, they frequent the sacraments, they do their utmost to fulfil the Christian precepts; and, when all is done, they find themselves solitary. There could scarcely be a more evident proof of their failure to understand one at least of the great motives of the Incarnation. They

adore Christ as God, they feed on Him in Communion, cleanse themselves in His precious Blood, look to the time when they shall see Him as their Judge; yet of that intimate knowledge of and companionship with Him in which the Divine Friendship consists, they have experienced little or nothing. They long, they say, for one who can stand by their side and upon their own level, who can not merely remove suffering, but can himself suffer with them, one to whom they can express in silence the thoughts which no speech can utter; and they seem not to understand that this is the very post which Jesus Christ Himself desires to win, that the supreme longing of His Sacred Heart is that He should be admitted, not merely to the throne of the heart or to the tribunal of conscience, but to that inner secret chamber of the soul where a man is most himself, and therefore most utterly alone.

See how full are the Gospels of this desire of Jesus Christ! There were indeed splendid moments when the God within the Humanity blazed out in glory -- moments when the very garments that He wore burned radiant in His Divinity: there were moments of Divine energy when blind eyes opened through creative to created light, when ears deaf to earthly noises heard the Divine Voice, when the dead burst their graves to look on Him who had first given and then restored their life. And there were august and terrible moments when God went apart with God into the wilderness or the garden, when God cried through the lips of desolated humanity, "Why hast Thou forsaken Me?" But for the most part it is of His Humanity that the Gospels tell us; a Humanity that cried to Its kind -- a Humanity not only tempted but also, as it were, specialized in all points like as we are. "Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister Mary, and Lazarus."<sup>2</sup> "Jesus, looking

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2. John xi: 5.



upon him, loved him"<sup>3</sup> him it seems with an emotion distinguished from that of the Divine Love that loves all things that It has made; loved him for the ideal which he in particular might yet accomplish, more than for the fact that he merely existed as did others of his kind -- loved him as I love my own friend, and as he loves me.

It is these moments, probably, above all others, that have endeared Jesus Christ to humanity -- moments in which He displayed Himself as truly one of us. It is when He is "lifted up" -- not in the glory of triumphant Divinity, but in the shame of beaten Humanity, that He draws us to Himself. We read of His works of power and are conscious of awe and adoration: but when we read how He sat weary at the well-side while His friends went for food; how in the Garden, He turned in agonized reproach to those from whom He had hoped for consolation -- "What? Could you not watch one hour with Me?"<sup>4</sup> -- He turned once more and for the last time used the sacred name to him who had forfeited it for ever -- "*Friend*, whereto art thou come?"<sup>5</sup> -- we are conscious of that which is even dearer to Him than all the adoration of all the angels in glory -- tenderness and love and compassion -- emotions to which friendship alone has a right. Or again; -- Jesus Christ speaks to us more than once in the Scripture, not merely in hint and implication, but in deliberate statement, of this desire of His to be our friend. He sketches for us a little picture of the lonely house at nightfall, of Himself who stands and knocks upon the door and of the intimate little meal He expects. "And if any man will open

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3. Mark x: 21.

4. Matt. xxvi: 41.

5. Matt. xxv: 50.

-- (any man!) -- I will come in to him and will sup with him and he with Me."<sup>6</sup> Or again, he tells those whose hearts are sick at the bereavement that comes upon them so swiftly, "I will not now call you servants . . . ; but I have called you friends."<sup>7</sup> Or again He promises His continual presence, in spite of appearances, to those who have learned His desires. "Where two or three are gathered in My Name, there am I in the midst."<sup>8</sup> . . . "Behold, I am with you all days."<sup>9</sup> And, "as long as you did it to one of these My least brethren, you did it to Me."<sup>10</sup>

If then there is anything clear in the Gospels it is this -- that Jesus Christ first and foremost desires our friendship. It is His reproach to the world, not that the Saviour came to the lost, and that the lost ran from Him to lose themselves more deeply, not that the Creator came to the Creature and that the Creature rejected Him; but that the Friend "came unto His own, and that His own received Him not."<sup>11</sup>

Now the consciousness of this friendship of Jesus Christ is the very secret of the Saints. Ordinary men can live ordinary lives, with little or no open defiance of God, from a hundred second-rate motives. We keep the commandments that we may enter into life; we avoid sin that we may escape hell; we fight against worldliness that we may

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6. Apoc. iii: 20.

7. John xv: 15.

8. Matt. xviii: 20.

9. Matt. xxviii: 20.

10. Matt. xxv: 40.

11. John i: 11.

keep the respect of the world. But no man can advance three paces on the road of perfection unless Jesus Christ walks beside him. It is this, then, that gives distinction to the way of the Saint -- and that gives him his apparent grotesqueness, too -- (for what is more grotesque in the eyes of the unimaginative world than the ecstasy of the lover?) Common-sense never yet drove a man mad; it is common-sense that is thought to characterize sanity; and common-sense, therefore, has never scaled mountains, much less has it cast them into the sea. But it is the maddening joy of the conscious companionship of Jesus Christ that has produced the lovers, and therefore the giants, of history. It is the developing friendship of Jesus Christ and the passion that has inspired those lives, which the world in its duller moods calls unnatural, and the Church, in all her moods, supernatural. "This priest," cried St. Teresa, in one of her more confidential moments with her Lord, "this priest is a very proper person to be made a *friend of ours*."

II. Now it must be remembered that while this friendship between Christ and the soul is, from one point of view, perfectly comparable to friendship between man and man, from another point of view it is incomparable. Certainly it is a friendship between His Soul and ours; but that Soul of His is united to Divinity. A single *individualistic* friendship with Him therefore does not exhaust His capacities. He is Man, but He is not merely A Man: He is The Son, rather than A Son of man. He is the Eternal Word by whom all things were made and are sustained. . . .

He approaches us therefore along countless avenues, although it is the same Figure that advances down each. It is not enough to know Him interiorly only: He must be known (if His relation with us is to be that which He desires) in all those activities and manifestations in which He displays Himself. One who knows Him therefore solely as an Interior Companion and Guide, however dear and adorable, but

does not know Him in the Blessed Sacrament -- one whose heart burns as he walks with Jesus in the way, but whose eyes are held that he knows Him not in the breaking of Bread, knows but one perfection out of ten thousand. And again, he who calls Him Friend in Communion, but whose devotion is so narrow and restricted that he does not recognize Him in that Mystical Body in which He dwells and speaks on earth -- one, in fact, who is a *dévo*t, an individualist, and does not therefore understand that corporate Religion which is the very essence of Catholicism; or, again, who knows Him in all these ways, yet does not know Him in His Vicar, or in His Priest, or in His Mother -- or, again, who knows Him in all these ways -- (who is, in popular language, an "admirable Catholic") -- but who does not recognize the right of the sinner to ask for mercy, or the beggar for alms, in His name: or again, who recognizes Him under sensational circumstances, but not under dreary ones -- who gives lavishly to the first beggar who pleads in Christ's Name in the street, but fails to find Him in the unappealing dullard -- those, in short, who recognize Christ in one or two or three or more aspects, but not in all -- (not, at least, in all those of which Christ Himself has explicitly spoken) -- can never rise to that height of intimacy and knowledge of that Ideal Friend which He Himself desires, and has declared to be within our power to attain.

Let us then consider the Friendship of Christ under some of these aspects. Truly we cannot live without Him, for He is the Life. It is impossible to come to the Father except by Him who is the Way. It is useless to toil in pursuit of truth, unless we first possess It. Even the most sacred experiences of life are barren unless His Friendship sanctifies them. The holiest love is obscure except it burns in His shadow. The purest affection -- that affection that unites my dearest friend to myself -- is a counterfeit and an usurper unless I love my

friend in Christ -- unless He, the Ideal and Absolute Friend, is the personal bond that unites us.

## The Friendship of Christ (Interior)

GEN. II: 18.

IT seems inconceivable at first sight that a relationship, which in any real manner can be called a friendship, should be possible between Christ and the soul. Adoration, dependence, obedience, service, and even imitation -- all these things are imaginable; but until we remember that Jesus Christ took a human soul like our own -- a soul liable to joy and to sorrow, open to the assaults of passion and temptation, a soul that actually did experience heaviness as well as ecstasy -- the pains of obscurity as well as the joys of clear vision -- until this becomes to us, from a dogmatic fact apprehended by faith, a vital fact perceived by experience, a full realization of His friendship is out of the question.

For just as in the case of ordinary persons the plane of real friendship lies in the communion of the two souls, so it is between Christ and a man. His Soul is the point of contact between His Godhead and our humanity. We receive His Body with our lips; we prostrate our whole being before His Divinity; but we embrace His Soul with ours.

I. Human friendships usually take their rise in some small external detail. We catch a phrase, we hear an inflection of a voice, we notice the look of the eyes, or a movement in walking; and the tiny experience seems to us like an initiation into a new world. We take the little event as a symbol of a universe that lies behind; we think we have detected a soul exactly suited to our own, a temperament which either from its resemblance to our own, or from a harmonious dissimilarity, is

precisely fitted to be our companion. Then the process of friendship begins; we exhibit our own characteristics; we examine his: in point after point we find what we expected to find, and we verify our guesses; and he too, no less, follows the same method, until that point is reached (as it is reached in so many cases, though not, thank God! in all), either in a crisis, or after a trying period, when we discover either that we have been mistaken from the beginning, or that we have deceived the other, or that the process has run its course; the summer is come and gone, and that there are no more fruits to gather on either side.

Now the Divine Friendship -- the consciousness, that is to say, that Christ desires our love and intimacy, and offers His own in return -- usually begins in the same manner. It may be at the reception of some sacrament, such as we have received a thousand times before; or it may be as we kneel before the Crib at Christmas, or follow our Lord along the Way of the Cross. We have done these things or performed those ceremonies dutifully and lovingly again and again; yet on this sudden day a new experience comes to us. We understand, for example, for the first time that the Holy Child is stretching His arms from the straw, not merely to embrace the world -- that would be little enough! -- but to embrace our own soul in particular. We understand as we watch Jesus, bloodstained and weary, rising from His third fall, that He is asking our own very self in particular to help Him with His burden. The glance of the Divine Eyes meets our own; there passes from Him to us an emotion or a message that we had never before associated with our own relations with Him. The tiny event has happened! He has knocked at our door, and we have opened; He has called and we have answered. Henceforth, we think, He is ours and we are His. Here, at last, we tell ourselves, is the Friend for whom we have been looking so long: here is the Soul that perfectly understands our own; the one

Personality which we can safely allow to dominate our own. Jesus Christ has leapt forward two thousand years, and is standing by our side; He has come down from the painting on the wall; He has risen from the straw in the manger -- My Beloved is mine and I am His. . .

II. The Friendship has begun then. Now begins its process.

The essence of a perfect friendship is that each friend reveals himself utterly to the other, flings aside his reserves, and shows himself for what he truly is.

The first step therefore in the Divine Friendship is the revelation by Jesus Christ of Himself. Up to this point in our spiritual life, however conscientious or dutiful that life may have been, there has been a predominant element of unreality. It is true that we have obeyed, that we have striven to avoid sin, that we have received grace, forfeited it and recovered it, that we have acquired merit or lost it, that we have tried to do our duty, endeavoured to aspire and to love. All this is real, before God. But it has not been real to ourselves. We have said prayers? Yes. But we have scarcely prayed. We have meditated -- set the points before us, reflected, resolved and concluded; but the watch has been laid open before us to mark our progress, lest we should meditate too long. But after this new and marvellous experience, all is changed. Jesus Christ begins to exhibit to us not merely the perfections of His past, but the glories of His presence. He begins to live before our eyes; He tears from Himself the conventions with which our imaginations have clothed Him; He lives, moves, speaks, acts, turns this way and that before our eyes. He begins to reveal secret after secret hidden in His own Humanity. We have known facts about Him all our life; we have repeated the Catholic creed; we have assimilated all that theology can tell us. Now, however, we pass from knowledge about Him, to knowledge of Him. We begin to understand that Eternal Life begins



in this present, for it is to "know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent."<sup>1</sup> Our God is becoming our Friend.

On the other side He demands from us what He Himself offers. If He strips Himself before our eyes, He claims that we should do the same. As our God He knows every fibre of the being which He has made; as our Saviour He knows every instant in the past in which we have swerved from His obedience: but, as our Friend, He waits for us to tell Him.

It is tolerably true to say that the difference between our behaviour respectively to an acquaintance and to a friend, is that in the first case we seek to conceal ourselves, to present an agreeable or a convenient image of our own character, to use language as a disguise, to use conversation as we might use counters; and in the second case that we put aside conventions and makeshifts, and seek to express ourselves as we are, and not as we would have our friend to think us to be.

This then is required of us in the Divine Friendship. Up to now our Lord has been content with very little: He has accepted a tithe of our money, an hour of our time, a few thoughts and a few emotions, paid over to Him in religious intercourse and worship. He has accepted those things instead of ourselves. Henceforth He demands that all such conventions should cease; that we should be entirely open and honest with Him, that we should display ourselves as we really are -- that we should lay aside, in a word, all those comparatively harmless make-believes and courtesies, and be utterly real. And it is probably true to say that in practically every instance where a soul believes herself disillusioned or disappointed with the Divine Friendship, it is not that she has actually betrayed her Lord or outraged Him or failed

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1. John vi: 3.

to rise to His demands in other matters; but that she has never truly treated Him as a friend at all; she has not been courageous enough to comply with that absolutely necessary condition of all true friendship, namely, a complete and sincere straightforwardness with Him. It is far less injurious to friendship to say outright, "I cannot do this thing that is asked of me, because I am a coward," than to find excellent reasons for not doing it.

III. Roughly speaking, then, this is the course which the Divine Friendship must take. We must consider later in detail the various events and incidents that characterize it. For it is an immense consolation to remember that there is not one such incident that has not been experienced by other souls before us. The Way of Divine Love has been trodden and retrodden already a thousand times. And it is useful, too, to reflect, before going further, that since this Friendship is one between two human souls, it will follow in a great degree the regular lines of all other friendships.

There are moments in it of bewildering bliss, at communion or in prayer -- moments when it appears (as indeed it is) to be the one supreme experience of life; moments when the whole being is shaken and transfused with love, when the Sacred Heart is no longer merely an object for adoration, but a pulsating thing that beats against our own; when the Bridegroom's Arms are about us, and His kiss on our lips. . . .

There are periods too of tranquillity and steady warmth, of an affection at once strong and reasonable, of an esteem and an admiration satisfying to the will and the intellect, as well as to the sensitive or emotional parts of our nature.

And there are periods, too -- months or years -- of misery and dryness: times at which it seems as if we actually needed patience with our Divine Friend; cases in which He appears to treat us with coldness

or disdain. There will actually be moments in which it needs all the loyalty we have not to cast Him off as fickle and deceptive. There will be misunderstandings, darkneses, obscurities.

Yet, as time passes, and as we emerge through these crises one by one, we come more and more to verify that conviction with which we first embraced our Friend. For this is indeed the one Friendship in which final disappointment is impossible; and He the one Friend who cannot fail. This is the one Friendship for whose sake we cannot humiliate ourselves too much, cannot expose ourselves too much, cannot give too intimate confidences or offer too great sacrifices. It is in the cause of this one Friend only and of His Friendship that the words of one of His intimates are completely justified in which he tells us that for His sake it is good to "count all things to be but loss" -- "and count them but as dung, that I may gain Christ."<sup>2</sup>

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2. Phil. iii: 8.

## The Purgative Way

*Wash me yet more from my iniquity.* -- PSALM 1: 4.

THE initial stage of the Friendship formed with Jesus Christ is usually one of extraordinary happiness. For the soul has found for the first time a companion whose sympathy is perfect and whose Presence is continuous. It is not, necessarily, that the soul consciously attends every instant to this new intimate, so much as that she is never wholly unconscious of him. As she goes about her ordinary business, paying to each detail of it as much attention as ever, the fact that He is present within her is never entirely forgotten: He is there as is the sunlight or the air, illuminating, freshening and inspiring all that she experiences. From time to time she turns to Him with a word or two; at times He speaks gently to her. She views all that she sees from His standpoint, or rather from her standpoint in Him; lovely things are more lovely because of His loveliness; painful things are less distressing because of His consolation. Nothing is indifferent, because He is present. Even when she sleeps, her heart wakes to him.

Yet this is only the initial stage of the process; and it is sweet largely because it is new. Certainly she has experienced a tremendous fact, yet so far she has but just entered upon it. There outstretches before her a road that ends only in the Beatific Vision; but there are countless stages to be passed before that end is attained.

For the Friendship, as so formed, is not an end in itself. Christ's desire is indeed to consummate it as soon as may be; yet it cannot be consummated by His mere desire. The soul herself must be educated, must be purified and cleansed so perfectly as to be united with Him by nothing except His grace. She must be first purged and then illuminated, first stripped of herself and then adorned with His favours, before she is fit for her final union. These two stages are named by spiritual writers, the Way of Purgation and the Way of Illumination, respectively: and our subject now is the Way of Purgation.

I. At first, as has been said, the soul takes extraordinary pleasure in all those external things which, it appears to her, are sanctified by Christ's Presence, and more especially by those which are most directly connected with His grace. For example, a soul that has just formed this Friendship -- that has, perhaps, either just entered the Catholic Church by conversion, or has, for the first time, consciously and deliberately awakened to the glories of Catholicism, or even to some imperfect form of Christianity, as that system through which Christ has approached her -- finds an overwhelming joy in even the most exterior details of that system. The human organization of the Church, her methods, her forms of worship, her music and her art -- all these things seem to the soul as wholly heavenly and divine.

And, extremely often, the first sign that the Way of purgation has been really entered, lies in a consciousness that there is beginning for her an experience which the world calls Disillusionment. It may come in a dozen different ways.

She may, for example, be brought face to face with some catastrophe in external matters. She may meet with an unworthy priest, a disunited congregation, some scandal in Christian life, in exactly that sphere where Christ seemed to her evidently supreme. She had thought that the Church must be perfect, because it was the Church