The Role of Friendship in Ministerial Formation

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The author invites readers to reflect on the important contribution “bold, healthy, and truly intimate friendships” can make on the vocational journey. Such friendships help support fidelity and perseverance, encourage honesty and self-knowledge, and strengthen both individuals and communities.

All great friendships help both parties discover the uniqueness their self possesses, the ‘me’ they should be” (Hendra, 268). That is one lesson Tony Hendra learned from his more than forty-year friendship with Father Joseph Warrillow, a monk of the Benedictine Abbey of Quarr on the Isle of Wight off the coast of England, chronicled in *Father Joe*, aptly subtitled *The Man Who Saved My Soul*. Hendra tells the story of a priest whose love never gave up on him and whose goodness kept calling him back. Though the stories of their lives could hardly have been more different, Father Joe was for Tony Hendra what good friends should always be: a person to turn to for affection and affirmation, support and consolation, but also challenge and correction. Through a failed marriage, years lost to drinking and drugs, depression and deep desolation, “this lumpy gargoyle of a man” remained Hendra’s “still center, the rock of my soul” (4), and helped him finally discover the self God’s love had always called him to be. “All my conscious life he was my strongest ally,” Hendra writes, “the cherished gatekeeper of my lost Eden, a lighthouse of faith blinking away through the oceanic fogs of

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success and money and celebrity and possessions, my intrepid guide in the tangled forest of human love, my silken lifeline to the divine, my Father Joe” (4–5).

At first glance the story of the friendship between a Benedictine monk in a remote English abbey and the man who is best known for having been editor of National Lampoon would seem to have nothing to say to the formation of people, both clerical and lay, for ministry. But perhaps there is a connection. The story points out what Aristotle, Augustine, Cicero, Aelred of Rievaulx, and later Jane Austen, discovered years ago: we cannot remain committed to the way of life goodness, holiness, and happiness require without the abiding companionship of friends. We need friends who care about our becoming good and growing into the self we are called to be. We need friends to sustain us on our vocational journeys, to be with us during periods of doubt and disillusionment, and to show us how to pursue our calls with integrity, passion, and hope. This is true for everybody, but it may be especially true today for persons pursuing vocations to priesthood and ministry. There are pitfalls and setbacks to any vocation, but perhaps especially for men and women called to the adventure of carrying on the mission and ministry of Jesus through service in the church. They struggle with loneliness, with being misjudged and misunderstood, with overwork and burnout. But some also struggle with temptations to status, power, and prestige, to self-deception and dishonesty, to pettiness and resentment, to self-absorption, laziness, and mediocrity. This is why formation for ministry and sustaining a vocation for ministry cannot be done apart from good friendships. We need friends to steady us, to abide with us, but most of all to help us be people of magnanimity, courage, and integrity.

The story of Father Joe and Tony Hendra might also have something to say to the recent sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church and one way the church is addressing it. Not long after the crisis broke, the Vatican announced that all Catholic seminaries and schools of ministry in the United States would be visited by teams of ecclesiastical investigators. These visitations have already begun. Though outwardly resembling the Vatican investigation of U.S. seminaries conducted in the mid-1980s, the current visits are decidedly more focused in their purpose. In the hope that the grievous behavior of some priests might never be repeated, the visitations, among other things, will examine how each seminary or school of ministry addresses issues of human
sexuality, clerical celibacy, the psychological development of seminarians and lay ministers, and professional ethics for ministers. All of these are obviously important, but if the primary concern of the investigation is the ongoing moral and spiritual development of future priests and ministers, perhaps some attention should also be given to the role of friendship in their vocational formation. In the analysis spurred by the sexual abuse crisis, little reflection was devoted to the presence or absence of the kinds of friendships that make honesty, excellence, and genuine intimacy possible. Seminaries and schools of ministry have many goals, but among them should be cultivating the kinds of relationships that help one remain healthily committed to the essential goods and purposes of one’s vocation.

This essay will explore the pivotal role of friendship in nurturing and sustaining vocations to priesthood and ministry in the church. We will look first at the nature and purpose of friendships, especially the difference between genuine and counterfeit forms of friendship. Second, we will explore the connection between friendship and vocational fidelity, suggesting that it is impossible to grow into the grace of one’s vocation without the support, guidance, and encouragement of friends. We will then reflect on friendship as an important source of self-knowledge and the crucial if difficult role of fraternal correction in the life of any good friendship. We will conclude with a brief analysis of how good friendships contribute to the development of one’s character.

**True and False Friendships**

Every friendship begins in some kind of attraction. Something about another person catches our attention, draws us to them, and gives us a way to connect with them. It can be an aspect of their personality or character—their sense of humor, their thoughtfulness toward others, their sensitivity and compassion. It can be their overall view of life, their convictions and beliefs, the goals they have set for themselves and what they have chosen to love (Wadell, 2002, 55). In each case there is something in the other person that draws us out of ourselves to seek companionship with them because whatever good we recognize in them, we also desire for ourselves and wish to pursue together with them.

Friendships form around shared goods—interests and activities that identify the meaning and purpose of the relationship and explain the life of the friendship. Some people are friends because they share a love for music, others because they enjoy wine tasting or shopping for antiques. Friendships can blossom around a mutual passion for sports and hobbies, for gardening and cooking, for social justice projects or volunteer work. But they can also come to life when people sense in one another a shared love for the things of God and a desire to grow together in the goodness and holiness of God. Each friendship is different
in light of the distinctive interests and activities that brought it into being and explain its existence. And in the best of friendships there are a variety of interests and activities at work: the friend who shares our love for gardening and music also shares our passion for God (Wadell, 2002, 62).

Friendships root us in particular relationships through which we choose to pursue with others the things on which we have staked the meaning of our lives. They define and direct our lives because they indicate what we care most deeply about, what we most want to become, and what we want our lives to witness for others. This is why those studying for the priesthood and ministry must have at least some friendships formed around a mutual desire to grow in love of God by devoting oneself to carrying on the work and ministry of Jesus in the church.

They need friendships centered in Christ, friendships that will support them in their life in Christ, not draw them away from it. Aelred of Rievaulx, the twelfth-century Cistercian abbot, called these spiritual friendships, relationships founded on a mutual love for Christ and a desire to grow together in Christ (Spiritual Friendship, 1.1-16). With Christ as a partner to the friendship, the friends help one another embrace their unique paths of discipleship.

But Aelred was a realist. His own past at the court of King David of Scotland had taught him that not every relationship was healthy, much less conducive to holiness. Also, when he looked around the monastic world of Rievaulx he saw some relationships that were emotionally intense but also spiritually and morally detrimental. He called these “carnal” friendships because they originated not in a shared love for the good, but “from mutual harmony in vice” (1.38). Carnal friendships commence when people have found others with whom they can remain comfortable with doing wrong. They are relationships in which each person perceives in the other a common weakness they want to exploit or a shared desire for things that, at the very least, will turn their attention away from God. Carnal friendships are relationships built on self-deception, unacknowledged conspiracies in which the “friends” implicitly agree not to challenge one another and not to speak the truth to one another, but rather to allow each other to grow complacent with mediocrity and even sin. Because their sole purpose is to satisfy the needs and desires of the self, they leave one untroubled by acts that exploit and manipulate, and sometimes even destroy. The ultimate harvest of carnal friendship is a tone-deaf conscience and a deeply entrenched cynicism about the good. Not surprisingly, Aelred dismissed these relationships as “falsely wearing the name of friendship” (1.35) because the very nature of a friendship is to seek what is best for the other, which is hardly the case in relationships whose cumulative effect is corrupting.

**Friendships should always make one better, not worse.**
Seminaries and schools of ministry should teach students to distinguish between such counterfeit friendships and true friendships, and create an environment where the best and healthiest relationships are modeled and can flourish. True friendships—what Aristotle called “virtue” friendships and Aelred, “spiritual” friendships—begin in a mutual love for what is truly magnanimous and good, a love for what is most promising and excellent for human beings. For those studying for the priesthood and ministry these are relationships governed by a passion for the things of God and a desire to grow together in friendship with God. In them friends grow in generosity, care, humility, compassion, truthfulness, and joy. In them the attitudes, virtues, and dispositions Jesus displayed in the gospels take root and begin to be embodied. In them the friends learn how to be merciful, how to forgive and be forgiven, how to serve, and how to find happiness in imitating Christ.

Friendships should always make one better, not worse, because the fundamental work of friendship is to seek the true good of one’s friend (Carmichael, 16). Friends are devoted to one another’s good. They summon one another to aspire after greatness not in power, titles, or prestige, but in goodness and holiness. They want what is best for one another and are committed to seeking and achieving it together. And they will never let their friendship degenerate into a partnership in mediocrity by which they allow one another gradually to withdraw from the good and grow complacent about the corrupting. A friendship is a sustained conversation about things that matter. For candidates for priesthood and ministry, nothing matters more than helping one another imitate Christ, grow in holiness, and find joy in doing so.

**Friendship and Vocational Fidelity**

On any vocational journey it is easy to lose one’s way by cultivating habits that make us forgetful of God and others. This is what makes friendships so indispensable for growing into the grace of one’s vocation and remaining faithful to it. Infidelity grows from inattentiveness, from neglecting to attend to the goods constitutive of one’s vocation because we focus our attention elsewhere: on troubling temptations, on trivialities, on comforts that start to consume us, on pastimes that distract us from what we ought to be about. The danger of cultivating such inattentiveness is that we get sidetracked from our true vocation, eventually forgetting who we are called to be and what our life ought to be about. Friends help one another “pay attention” to what matters most in their lives. They know how easy it is to grow discouraged, to be distracted by other possibilities, or to be seduced by the enchantments of self-absorption. Friends steady one another. They support and encourage one another in their commitments. They help one another stay focused on what they take to be the
true path of their lives. Seminarians and students for ministry need to have such relationships in their lives. They need to be encouraged to form them and cherish them. But they will only do so when they see them modeled by those who guide and teach them. They need to be part of wider communities where such healthy, intimate, supportive relationships are not exceptional, much less cynically derided, but expected.

Friendships are indispensable to anyone’s vocational journey because, as that journey unfolds, it is easy to grow discouraged and disillusioned (Wadell, 1989, 59–61). We struggle with our own weaknesses and shortcomings as well as those of others and of the institutions of which we are a part. We wrestle with setbacks and disappointments and begin to doubt the value of our call. We grow weary and disenchanted, confused, resentful, and sometimes even bitter. We lose heart. This is why we cannot take that journey alone. Friends help one another battle with vocational disenchantment. They encourage, counsel, and support one another, and they help each other remain enthusiastic about their callings. Together they navigate the challenges and setbacks that are part of any vocational journey. It is impossible to remain committed in one’s vocation without the support of friends who help us re-enkindle passion for the purposes to which we have given our lives. If we are to continue on the path of our vocation we need perseverance—which Aquinas described as “prolonged endurance in any good which is difficult” (S.T. II-II, 137,1)—but we know we cannot persevere alone. We persevere together, with others who walk the path with us and who believe the call we share is worth the effort it requires.

Friendships remind us that faithfulness and perseverance are not individual achievements; rather, they are “communal virtues” inasmuch as they are virtues we do not and cannot possess alone but must receive from and share in with others (Hauerwas and Pinches, 36). Faithfulness and perseverance come to life in communities and relationships where people, instead of being cordial strangers to one another, have time for one another, care for one another, are accountable to one another, and attend to one another. They are mediated in settings where people pray together, are truly present to one another, want what is best for one another, and are committed to one another. Seminaries and schools of ministry should be such places, settings characterized not by isolation or loneliness but places where individuals find precisely the companionship and way of life that make faithfulness and perseverance possible. In this respect friendships do more than make one’s vocational journey more interesting or pleasant; rather, they
make one's vocational journey trustworthy and full of hope because they provide the very practices and form of life necessary for understanding, growing in, and remaining faithful to one's vocation.

Friendship: Knowing Our Self through Another

A third reason friendships are important for the moral and spiritual formation of students for ministry and the priesthood is that friends know us better than most, sometimes even better than we know ourselves. As friendships grow, the friends gain insights about one another, insights about the friend's talents, temperament, personality, and character, but also insights about the friend's struggles and weaknesses. It is important to know ourselves, but our knowledge of ourselves is limited. It is also not always trustworthy because it can be tainted by self-deception, particularly concerning our weaknesses and our wayward desires; it is selective and sometimes deliberately cloudy. We don't want to admit that we can be self-serving, myopic, and self-righteous. None of us is quick to confess that we can be jealous of another's success, overly ambitious, or resentful. We are all skilled at overlooking the unsavory aspects of ourselves, but very good at pointing them out in others (Matt 7:3-5; Luke 6:41-42).

This is where our friends can help us. One great gift of good friendships is having someone who cares about us enough to be truthful with us. Any friendship of depth, any friendship that will grow and endure over time, must be built on truthfulness, not flattery. There is no shortage of people who can flatter us (and this can be a particular occupational danger for anyone in ecclesiastical leadership or ministry). But there are few people so devoted to our good that they do not hesitate to be truthful with us, especially when it is a truth we may not want to hear. Truthfulness is an obligation of friendship. Friends have a responsibility to be truthful with one another, especially about attitudes, habits, and behavior that are detrimental to the moral and spiritual development of the friend. No one can grow in his or her vocation to ministry without friends who care enough to be honest with them. It is honesty born from love, an honesty that reflects a lasting commitment to challenge the friend to growth in goodness and holiness precisely because they care for them and want what is best for them.

Good friends never substitute agreeableness for truthfulness. One of the elements of the sexual abuse crisis that most perplexed people was how some priests continued their abusive behavior for years with little intervention from others. People rightly wondered how this could have occurred. Perhaps one explanation is that the priests lacked the kind of adult friendships capable of truthfulness. One sure way to remain untroubled by behavior one ought to repent is to surround oneself with people who will never question or challenge. What kinds of relationships filled the lives of the priests guilty of abuse? Did
they surround themselves with people who would never prod, who would never ask the disquieting question? Or did they become experts at developing elaborate strategies of evasion as well as strategies for avoiding genuine adult intimacy, because they feared the vulnerability and truthfulness genuine intimacy requires?

In *Spiritual Friendship*, Aelred of Rievaulx says one of the reasons we need close, intimate relationships is that each of us needs some people with whom we can be completely honest and open, and who challenge us to be so (3.83). We need people we trust and with whom we feel comfortable enough to share not only our hopes and our dreams but also our struggles, setbacks, and disappointments. We need people with whom we do not hesitate to reveal all the aspects of our lives, including our failures, our regrets, and even our sinfulness, and who help us attend to them (2.11). Such friends may be few, but they are precious and essential because at least with them we can drop the masks and disguises. And once that happens, genuine growth and true intimacy follow. But this can occur only if the friends, when necessary, are free to offer one another counsel and guidance, but also challenge and correction. The friendships most essential for the formation of priests and ministers demand people who do not hesitate to speak if they see their friends slipping into behavior that will draw them away from God or be detrimental to their vocations.

**Friendship and Fraternal Correction**

This is why there must be a place for fraternal correction in the life of every genuine friendship. St. Thomas Aquinas saw fraternal correction as a duty of charity, an obligation of love (S.T. II-II, 33, 1). Interestingly, he described charity as a life of friendship with God and friendship with others, and said the life of charity should culminate in joy and peace. But he also realized that joy and peace would never be reached without cultivating the practice of fraternal correction. Happiness and peace are inseparable from goodness, and thus always absent from sin. This is why anyone unwilling to confront, or to have confronted, habits and behavior that turn them away from God and damage their relationships with others will never know happiness and peace. Fraternal correction has to have a place in any real friendship. Its purpose is not to shame wrongdoers, but to care enough about them to call them back to their true good and warn them of the dangers of sin. Aquinas did not believe fraternal correction would be easy. But he knew if the command to love one’s neighbor—the work of any real friendship—is to be more than a platitude, it must sometimes take the form of correction.

Encouraging fraternal correction seems far-fetched in a society that sees almost all our behavior as a purely private matter. And it may seem impossibly impractical within institutions and systems where people are accustomed to
leave one another alone. But Aquinas insisted on friends (and communities) willing to embrace this practice because he knew the wrong we do harms not only ourselves, but others as well. For him fraternal correction was a duty of charity and an obligation of friendship, out of love not only for an individual but also for the larger community. Wrongdoing, Aquinas noted, is not only “something that hurts the sinner himself” but is also always “a blow to the common good” (S.T. II-II, 33, 1). The sexual abuse crisis in the church surely attests to this. This is why seminaries and schools of ministry must create the kind of institutional culture where such bold, healthy, and truly intimate relationships can flourish.

Friendship and Character Development

All of these reflections on the importance of friendship for ministerial formation are rooted in one fundamental conviction: We become good by spending time with good people and seeking what is best together with them. Aristotle captured the essential connection between friendship and goodness when he wrote that friendship “is some sort of excellence or virtue, or involves virtue, and it is, moreover, most indispensable for life” (NE 1155a3-4). He recognized that the best of friendships, in addition to being rich, intimate relationships, are also highly moral relationships because they provide the form of life necessary for growing together in goodness (Sherman, 127). We learn what it means to love, we learn how to care for someone other than ourselves, we learn to be patient, kind, faithful, fair, and courageous not as solitary sojourners but in relationships with people who prize these qualities as well. Friendship is a crucible for our ongoing moral and spiritual development, a context in which the deep transformation necessary for growing in goodness occurs, because we do not become and remain good singlehandedly, but only in company with others (Wadell, 1989, 61–66). To put it differently, our hold on goodness is much too fragile not to require the constant support and encouragement of others. As Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches note, “Good people help keep each other good” (36).

All this can make friendships sound like serious business. Friendships are fun, freeing, and full of surprises. They are one of the greatest gifts of our lives because we often discover the love and goodness of God through the love and goodness of our friends. They are graced, joyful adventures that call us out of ourselves in order to delight in another. But they are serious business because of the impact they have on our lives. As Tony Hendra discovered through his friendship with Father Joe, the best friends help us discover and live the uniqueness of our self, the “me” God calls us to be. With the Vatican review of U.S. seminaries and schools of ministry underway, it is important to address the role of friendship in ministerial formation, and how seminaries and schools of ministry
are encouraging and modeling the kinds of relationships that make excellence and integrity in living one's vocation possible. Absent such friendships, one's vocational journey is wearying, frequently misplaced, and easily abandoned. But with them that journey becomes a joyful, hopeful enterprise in which the promise inherent to any vocation can be fulfilled. In short, one response to the sexual abuse crisis in the church is to call those preparing for ministry to risk a different kind of intimacy.

References


