



— Chapter 9 —

A Dialogue of Love and Friendship with Our Lord

Jesus calls us his friends. He says to us: “I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have learnt from my Father” (John 15:15). Friends talk to each other about everything that is going on in their lives. There is nothing too insignificant for true friends. Because Jesus is our friend as well as Our Lord and Saviour, our prayer will always flow from this reservoir of friendship. We talk with Jesus, in our own words, from our hearts. We have, of course, our formal prayers that we have looked at throughout this book, but the heart of all those prayers is the prayer of friendship. We know Jesus, we rejoice in his friendship and we speak with him from our hearts. That is the essence of good prayer.

In calling us his friends, Jesus reveals to us our deepest identity. Only Jesus, the Son of God, can fully reveal to us our true identity. He enables us to see our true selves with the eye of faith. We are Christ’s friends, his brothers and sisters, God the Father’s sons and daughters. Jesus keeps reminding us that we were created by God his Father, we are made in God’s image and likeness, and through our redemption “we have been reborn of water and the Holy Spirit” (John 3:5). Jesus Christ, by becoming a human being like us, became a brother to every human being ever born into this world. He acknowledges us as his brothers and sisters, as his friends, and he invites us to live in friendship with him. As a true friend, he reveals to us the mystery of his own life and he wants to share his life deeply with us. In his great prayer to God the Father he said: “I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, so that they may always see the glory you have given me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24). Jesus’ one desire for us is that we will share eternal life with

him and with God his Father. He gave us this clear description of eternal life when he said: “Eternal life is this: to know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). We know God through the light of faith that Jesus gives us and through the revelation that he has brought to us. It is because of that light of faith that we can accept and believe his revelation of God to us.

The Indwelling of the Holy Trinity in Our Hearts

One truly amazing truth that Jesus reveals to us is this: “If anyone loves me he will keep my word and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him, and make our home in him” (John 14:23). Without this divine revelation we would never even begin to imagine that the all holy God, the creator of the whole universe, and his Son, Jesus Christ, would come and dwell in our hearts. On this word of Jesus we can now say that God our Father dwells in our hearts, that Jesus our Redeemer also dwells in our hearts and that the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sends to us from the God the Father also dwells in our hearts. This is the profound mystery of the indwelling of the Holy Trinity in our hearts. St Paul had to ask the Corinthians: “Didn’t you realise that you are God’s temple and that the Spirit of God was living in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16).

We believe these extraordinary truths about the three divine persons of the Holy Trinity making their home in our hearts because Jesus Christ reveals them to us. When we allow these truths to surface in our conscious mind, we are in a state of prayer. And the more frequently we dwell on them and embrace them in our hearts, the more abundantly will Jesus fill our hearts with gratitude to God, a gratitude that will express itself in our own spontaneous prayer of the heart.

“Christian prayer has a Trinitarian shape.”¹²⁸ The indwelling of the Holy Trinity in our hearts and in the heart of all creation is the foundation of all prayer. It is customary to begin all our prayers with the words, “In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”,

and we conclude many of our prayers with the words, “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit”. And from the revelation of Jesus we believe that these three divine persons dwell at the very core of our being, where they have made their home in us. This is the spiritual source of the vitality of our life of faith. Rooted in the mystery of the indwelling of the Holy Trinity in our hearts, we can face every challenge as we look to the future with hope and absolute trust in God. In a beautiful line, Pope Benedict XVI wrote: “The success of our lives is found in our participation in the Trinitarian life offered to us.”¹²⁹

Dialogue of Love

Through the gift of prayer we enter into the mystery of God himself, into the unfathomable ocean of his love. Prayer becomes a genuine dialogue of love. When we open our hearts in friendship with Jesus we begin our dialogue of love with him. We talk to him about everything that is going on in our lives: the joys and worries of family life; every decision that we have to make; every new venture we may be thinking of undertaking. And, of course, we talk with him too about all our struggles, our failures, our weakness and sinfulness, and we do this without embarrassment, believing that we are talking with our closest friend who fully understands us and who is always faithful and ready to help.

This dialogue of love, unlike our time for formal prayers, is unstructured and spontaneous. Good people have often said to me, “I don’t give much time to prayer, but I talk to God a lot throughout the day.” They feel that if they are not down on their knees saying their formal prayers they are not giving much time to prayer. They feel great relief when I point out to them that talking to God in their own words throughout the day is the great gift of prayer, the prayer of the mystic, who lives in the presence of God and who finds God in all things and in all situations. Indeed, the very purpose of our

times of formal prayer is to create within us that awareness of God's presence with us and within us throughout the day.

This dialogue of love is your own personal conversation with Christ, and the more you engage in it, the more frequent it will become. You developed the other friendships in your life by talking with your friends, by giving them time, by sharing with them some of your joys and sorrows. In a similar way, the more you talk with Jesus about your life, the closer you become to him and the more you will find yourself in communion with God each day. You will become more aware of his presence in your life and more aware of his divine providence in the daily events of your life. Instead of saying things like, "I was very lucky," you will thank God for his care in that situation. As someone said, "There are no coincidences, there are just God incidences." Living the life of faith opens our eyes to see the hand of God in all the events of the day. That is why St Paul says to us, "Pray constantly; for all things give thanks" (1 Thessalonians 5:17-18).

The Spontaneity of Our Dialogue with Christ

You have, I am sure, often found yourself talking quite spontaneously to the Lord about something or some person in your life. That spontaneity was the gift of the Holy Spirit. We seek to develop that spontaneity in our relationship with God. One of our old Redemptorist brothers, some years ago, was pressed for time and had to get the chapel ready for a service. To add to his problems, he knocked a flowerpot over in the sanctuary and was heard shouting, "Lord, give me a break. Can't you see I am hard pressed to get the chapel ready?" That was good spontaneous prayer, revealing a deep personal relationship with Jesus. That holy brother carried on this kind of spontaneous dialogue with the Lord throughout the day. He believed that Jesus was with him in every situation and he had a word with the Lord about every situation. He lived in union with God each day.

God wills us to live in union with him, not just when we say our formal prayers or go to Mass, but at all times and in all places. God is as truly present with you when you are doing your shopping in the supermarket as he is when you are on your knees saying your prayers. God is absent from no circumstance of our life. In fact, it is in and through the ordinary daily events of our life that God comes to us. As St Pope John Paul II said in his encyclical *Faith and Reason*, “God comes to us in the things we know best and can verify most easily, the things of our everyday life, apart from which we cannot understand ourselves.”¹³⁰ As we become aware of God’s presence in “the things of our everyday life” we find ourselves engaging in our dialogue of love and friendship with Christ and with God our Father. This dialogue, like all other forms of prayer, is the gift and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Those moments of communion with God, as you go about your daily work, are the soul of all true prayer. You are now finding God in all things, in all places, in all the circumstances of your life. You are consciously living in the presence of God. In those moments you have become a true contemplative, a mystic. Those moments may not last long but they assure you that God is with you. They sanctify your whole day and give you a new vision for your day. You are now living a holistic spirituality which embraces both your relationship with God and all the activities of your daily life.

A holistic spirituality finds God in the familiar events and patterns of our life: in all our relationships; in family and friends; and even in those who are not our friends but may have become our critics or enemies. That is why Jesus says to us, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; in this way you will be sons and daughters of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:44-45). This is the real challenge we have to face on our way to our heavenly homeland. The God whom we love and seek to serve in this world is present not only in our friends, but also in our foes. That is why Christ says to us, “Pray for those who persecute you,” because if we don’t pray

for them we will not be able to acknowledge that God is with them. And then we will find it very difficult “to love our enemies” as Jesus asks us to do. But the experience of those who actually pray for their enemies is that although they may never again become friends, the enemy no longer has power to rob their hearts of peace. They can see their enemy and wish him or her peace.

Practical Steps

Each of us has the capacity for contemplation. We can look in wonder at beautiful things; we can be deeply moved by human joy or sorrow; we can be still and silent in the presence of loved ones. In each of these emotions the deepest reality we experience is the presence of God. But so often we haven't woken up to God's presence. It is easy to say that we believe in the mystery of the indwelling of the Holy Trinity in our hearts, but it is not so easy to allow that truth to influence the way we live and relate to others. We need a spiritual reawakening each day. So often our bodies are wide awake, taking part in all kinds of activities, but our spirits seem to be asleep, unaware of the divine life within. Yet, despite our forgetfulness, God is present within us – loving and sustaining us, and inviting us to a life of communion with Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is present in each event and in each situation, but we need to wake up to his presence.

The poet and patriot Joseph Mary Plunkett, who was executed for his part in the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, was wide awake to God's presence, Christ's presence, in the world. His poem on this divine presence has been much appreciated:

I see his blood upon the rose
and in the stars the glory of his eyes,
His body gleams amid eternal snows,
his tears fall from the skies.
I see his face in every flower;
the thunder and the singing of the birds

are but his voice – and carven by his power
rocks are his written words.
All pathways by his feet are worn,
His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea,
his crown of thorns is twined with every thorn,
his cross is every tree.

Plunkett saw in the ordinary things of this world a deeper reality. His contemplative spirit was awake to the presence of Christ in all things and in all people. But sometimes we may find it easier to rejoice in God's presence when we behold some beautiful scene than to see Christ really present in another person.

Our inner dialogue of love and friendship with Christ will begin to embrace everyone in our life when we ask the Lord to enable us to see all of them as he sees them. At times we may see some of them as an enemy, or a drunk, or a beggar, or a nuisance, but Christ sees his brother or sister in each of them. We need to "borrow" the eyes of Jesus to see them in the way he sees them. That is what our gift of faith is. It gives us a new vision of the world and of everyone God has placed in this world.

The Gift of Each New Day

If we want to grow in this spirituality of finding God in all things and of engaging in our dialogue of love and friendship with Christ about everything that is going on in our lives, we need to discipline our hearts and minds so that our spirits stay awake during the day. This is the importance of having some form of morning prayer. As we wake up to a new day, we should also wake up to the presence of God in the new day and thank him for the gift of the new day. This new day has never been here before. God has just created it for us. Many people who went to sleep the night before didn't wake up to welcome the new day. That is why the simple prayer *Thank you Lord for the gift of this new day* is so powerful and effective.

You may be saying that the morning is not your best time for any kind of prayer. But you don't have to make eloquent speeches to God. All you have to do is acknowledge his presence, thank him for the new day and offer him all your thoughts, words and actions of the day. It makes no difference if you are still half asleep. A sleepy offering to God will have the same effect on your spirit as a chirpy one!

A Dialogue with Jesus or with Our Inner Critic

Our dialogue of love and friendship with Christ that we have been talking about is not, of course, the only dialogue that goes on in our hearts. In fact, all day long we are engaged in some kind of dialogue. Sometimes in that dialogue we can be making a very critical self-assessment: finding fault with ourselves and sometimes saying things to and about ourselves that we would never tolerate if they came from someone else! We are responding to what the psychologists call "the inner critic" or "the pathological critic". This is an inner voice that always says something negative, never says a good word about you, and no matter how well you may be doing, will always find some grounds for criticising you. This "inner critic voice" is not to be confused with the voice of God, which always encourages us. Nor is it to be confused with the voice of conscience, which always points out the right thing to do, and if we do the wrong thing, always draws that to our attention. The inner critic voice is not about right or wrong but about how you failed to perform some task with excellence. It keeps repeating negative evaluations of how you have done, maybe even calling you stupid or comparing you unfavourably with someone in your family or some friend. It keeps repeating: "You should have done better"; "You never get anything right"; "You start but you never finish"; "You are never on time." No matter how well you do, the inner critic will never say, "Well done."

Engaging in dialogue with the inner critic is not only useless, because you will never get a word of encouragement from it, it is also very undermining of your self-esteem. God wants us to see ourselves as

he sees us. Throughout the scriptures God assures us that we are made in his image and likeness, that we are precious in his sight, that we are “his work of art”, that he loves us with an everlasting love and that he will never cease loving us. God wants us to believe his words and to live by his words. The inner critic wants the opposite. It wants to put us down and make us feel that we are not much good at anything. Because we have lived with our inner critic all our lives, psychologists point out that no matter how outrageous its attacks are, it is generally always believed. That is why many of us can find it hard to accept any word of praise. We always try to push the praise away by saying something like, “I could have done better.”¹³¹

But we don’t have to listen to the inner critic, nor do we have to respond to it. Instead, we need to immediately substitute our dialogue with Christ our Lord for the dialogue that the inner critic wants to engage in. Our dialogue with the word of God is life-affirming. Speaking about this dialoguing with the word of God, Pope Benedict wrote: “We were created in the word and we live in the word; we cannot understand ourselves unless we are open to this dialogue.”¹³²

Our daily interior dialogue can and should be with God, who created us, who dwells in our hearts and who is encouraging us to reach our full potential, which is holiness of life. When we are talking with Jesus about our struggles, our difficulties, our joys and our sorrows, the inner critic has to remain silent. In fact, as soon as our inner critic begins to sound off, we should immediately begin our dialogue with Jesus. We can say, for instance, *Lord, you know I tried to do my best. I failed, but with your help I will do better next time.* The inner critic has no answer to that.

We live by God’s word, not by the word of the inner critic. In living our life of prayer, it is most important for each of us to be convinced of this truth and to do our best each day to silence the negative voice of the inner critic. Often good people say to me, “But perhaps that inner voice is speaking the truth.” As I mentioned above, the voice

of God speaks the truth and the voice of conscience speaks the truth, but the inner critic applies a norm of excellence that we can never attain. God wants us to attain holiness of life by his grace, and when we respond to his grace we are growing in holiness. We do not attain holiness by our own efforts. But many of us have been brought up on what a priest friend of mine loved to call “muscular Christianity” – the idea that it is all down to our own efforts.

Some years ago a very discouraged priest arrived at our Renewal Centre. I listened to his story on the first evening and discovered that the cause of his discouragement was the fact that he couldn't pray. All his parishioners were praising him for his zeal and good work, but because he himself was not praying he was beginning to feel an awful hypocrite and was heading for a nervous breakdown. His inner critic was tormenting him. When I heard his story I opened the Bible at Chapter 43 of the prophet Isaiah and asked him to read it out to me. This took him a bit by surprise, but he read out these familiar words:

Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by your name, you are mine.
Should you pass through the sea, I will be with you;
or through rivers, they will not swallow you up...
Because you are precious in my eyes,
because you are honoured and I love you...
Do not be afraid, for I am with you...
(Isaiah 43:1-2, 4-5)

When he had read this passage I said to him: “God has just spoken to you. Do you want to respond?” He was silent for a few minutes, pondering this in his heart, and then he said with considerable emphasis, “He is not speaking to me.” He could not believe that God was telling him that he was precious in his eyes or that he was honoured and loved by God. He had no problem believing that every single person in his parish was precious in God's eyes, but he could

not believe it of himself. He felt that God just about tolerated him. He believed that God came to others through his priestly ministry, but he had no sense of God coming to him himself. His inner critic had filled him with self-negativity. I suggested to him that he should attend the Holy Hour that evening and join the sabbatical group of around sixty priests and religious who were on our three-month renewal course. I said, “The only prayer I want you to say as you sit before the Blessed Sacrament is, *Jesus, I thank you that I am precious in your Father’s eyes.*” He gave me a rather strange look but quickly said, “All right, I will give it try.” And he did. He told me afterwards that during that first evening of trying to make the Holy Hour he would look around occasionally and see all the others absorbed in their prayer while he was sitting there wringing his hands and trying to mean what he was saying when he said, “Jesus, I thank you that I am precious in your Father’s eyes.” But he kept it up each evening and after about three days of making the Holy Hour with the group he was so full of prayer that he couldn’t stop praying. He was spending hours in the church.

What had happened to him? He had silenced his inner critic that was filling him with negativity about himself and had begun his dialogue with Jesus. He stayed with us for a month. By the time he left he was completely renewed in his spirit. Gone was his daily dialogue with his inner critic and in its place was a life-affirming dialogue of love and friendship with Jesus and with God his Father. I have often reflected on his experience and on the power of the simple prayer, *Jesus, I thank you that I am precious in your Father’s eyes.* It also made clear to me that the only way to silence the inner critic is to begin a new dialogue with the Lord, who says to us, “I call you my friends.”

That priest went back to his parish full of confidence and with his heart full of prayer. Not only was he saying all the official prayers of the Church with joy and gratitude each day, his dialogue of love and friendship with the Lord continued throughout the day. He would

suddenly find himself talking to the Lord, praising his name and thanking him for all his graces and blessings. St Thérèse described well the kind of prayer he was now experiencing: “For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.”¹³³

The Surge of the Heart

This “surge of the heart” which he was now experiencing was the soul of all the other prayers he said during the day. As a priest he had to say many formal liturgical prayers in the celebration of the sacraments and in praying the Divine Office. Without that “surge in the heart”, those prayers had remained very dry and at times tedious. But with the grace of his new dialogue of love and friendship with Jesus, with his new awareness that he was truly precious in the Father’s eyes, those formal prayers came alive for him. He rejoiced when he was standing in God’s presence at the altar and leading his parishioners in the great Eucharistic prayer of thanksgiving which is the Mass.

There comes a moment in all our lives when God wants to give us a new grace of prayer. St Paul said, “Pray all the time, asking for what you need, praying in the Spirit on every possible occasion” (Ephesians 6:18). We know that we cannot be on our knees all day, so how can we pray all the time? This is the great grace that Jesus encourages us to ask from God:

Ask and it will be given to you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you... If you then, evil though you are, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Luke 11:9, 13)

It is only through the gift of the Holy Spirit that we can pray, as St Paul says, “on every possible occasion”.

As we saw in Chapter 2, it is in our hearts that we respond to the gift of prayer, and even when we are busy going about many things, our hearts can still be focused on God. Jesus says to us, “Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on his righteousness, and all these other things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). If our hearts are focused on God, then that “surge of the heart” will happen and we will find ourselves engaged in an inner dialogue of love and friendship with Jesus at unexpected moments. We will become aware of being in God’s presence. The more frequently we acknowledge his presence with us during the day, the more we will experience this spontaneous dialogue in our hearts. We will be speaking to God from our hearts, no longer depending on the formal prayers that we say at other times of the day.

The Need for a Spiritual Alarm Clock

St Alphonsus de Liguori used very practical means to alert himself to the presence of God. He kept a clock on his table which chimed every fifteen minutes. When he heard those chimes, Alphonsus opened himself more consciously to the presence of God and lived that moment more intensely believing that God was with him. His example was a great help to me one year. I was a student at our international house in Rome in 1966. On my corridor on the third floor, there was just one phone. If a student received a call he would have to come to that phone. It was outside my door. For the first day or two I didn’t mind answering the phone and walking along the corridor to tell students they had a phone call. But after a few days I found I was beginning to resent it. Should I just ignore it, let it ring and wait for someone else to answer it? My resentment was beginning to turn into anger and unwillingness to be of help. Then I got the grace to remember St Alphonsus’ clock. The phone could be my “spiritual alarm clock”. I said to myself, *Each time that phone rings I will take it as a call from God to become aware of his presence.* From then on, the ring of the phone woke up my

slumbering spirit. As I walked to answer the phone I was able to have a conscious moment with God in prayer. In fact, that phone became the occasion of my best prayer during that year. Every time the phone rang I was able to “raise my mind and heart to God”. For me, God was on the line. Then I could celebrate the sacrament of the present moment. It is in the present moment that God is truly present, and once we open our hearts to his presence we have a true encounter with God. We begin again our dialogue of love and friendship with the Lord. The “surge of the heart” happens.

As we come to the end of this book on prayer you might find it very helpful if you could identify for yourself one or two “spiritual alarm clocks” that would give you a wake-up call during the day. This will be a great help to you as you seek to live each day in the presence of God. As prayer is our spiritual lifeline with the Lord, the more we breathe in its spiritual oxygen, the more intimate our communion with God will become and the more frequent will be our dialogue of love and friendship with the Lord.