

GENUINE FRIENDSHIP

THE FOUNDATION FOR ALL PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS,
INCLUDING MARRIAGE AND THE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

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Chapter One

We Were Made for Love

“A person is an entity of a sort to which the only proper and adequate way to relate is love.”

From *Love and Responsibility*
Pope John Paul II

Some Initial Thoughts

This book is about relating. It is about the art of friendship considered broadly, including the friendship between a husband and wife and the friendship between God and his people. Most people value their close personal relationships more than anything else in life. In the Scriptures we read, “A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter: he that has found one has found a treasure. There is nothing so precious as a faithful friend, and no scales can measure his excellence.”¹ It is interesting to note that the “faithful friend” is described as a “treasure.” We usually use that word to describe something that is not only very good but also somewhat *rare*. Since antiquity the true, faithful friend has been viewed as something rather uncommon. Aristotle, who saw genuine friendship as a virtue, said that this type of friendship is rare because this type of *man* is rare. How many *really* virtuous men or women are there? C.S. Lewis made the same point: “few value it because few experience it.”²

Even those who are not blessed with many friends or with particularly good friends recognize that friendship is an important part of life. When asked what he or she values most in life, most will answer something like, “The people I love.” Our greatest joys in life are our associations and relationships with people. Whether it is our spouse, our children, our best friend, or God, our lives are centered around other people. We need them. The *things* in our life simply will not do. And the reason for that is simple—*things* cannot love us. We want to love and to be loved. It is the way we were made. We were

made for *interpersonal union*—made to give ourselves to others and to receive the gift of others. And this sharing in the life of others is an integral aspect of our fulfillment. The human person “finds himself only by the sincere gift of himself.”³ While some seem to live this way with the greatest ease and naturalness, there are many for whom this is the greatest struggle of their lives.

In my life as a priest, I encounter people both young and old who express a desire to have deeper and more satisfying relationships. Many feel *disconnected* from others. High speed internet access, instant messaging, e-mail, and cell phones have become a permanent part of our culture. Yet, ironically, people today seem to be *less* connected in the deeper, substantial, and more personally satisfying ways. It is as though technology is rebounding back on us. People claim they have no time. Think of the last time you wrote a letter—or even a note. Written—not typed. There is something about a handwritten note that is different from one that is typed—much less an e-mail. It is a *personal* communication in a richer sort of way. One might ask, “Who has time for a handwritten note today?” That is our problem. We do not have time today. Is it that we do not *have* time or that we do not *make* time? There has been a cultural shift in the way we communicate, and that, in turn, has had an effect on our relating. We have traded substance and depth for speed and convenience.

If this topic of friendship and deeper relating interests you, then, this book is for you. It will not answer all your questions or solve all your problems. You cannot *read* yourself into good relationships. But you might pick up an insight or two. If that insight gives rise to better relating, then the time spent reading this work will be time well-spent.

Looking at the way people relate, you can see people at every point along a continuum. Some seemingly relate with ease and freedom, while others appear to be perpetually awkward in social settings. Some relate only superficially while others connect very deeply with others. How do we account for this? A number of factors influence the way we relate to others. Our natural dispositions—our personality and temperament—have a lot to do with it. Personality flaws and temperamental quirks are relational handicaps that make interpersonal relating challenging, both for the one with handicaps and for those who befriend him or her—or who try to. It is hard to get close to those who are, say, perpetually crabby and critical.

Sometimes these characteristics are seen as early as infancy. Some babies are blessed with sweet and agreeable dispositions, while others seem to cry no matter what you do to them or for them. It is their natural disposition.

To some extent, the “rule of reciprocity” helps to explain why people relate the way they do. As a general rule, people tend to relate to others according to the way they perceive others to be relating to them. If I think somebody likes me and enjoys being around me, I relate differently than I do with the person who generally dislikes me and does not enjoy having me around. To an extent, there is a natural reciprocity in our interaction with others. This is illustrated in the story of two cowboys. One day a cowboy rides into town and stops at the saloon. He sits down at the bar and says to the bartender, “I have just arrived here. What are the people like?” The bartender asks, “What were the people like in the last town you were in?” The cowboy answers, “They were kind people, gently disposed, agreeable and generally pleasant to be with.” The bartender replies, “I suspect you will find the people here to be the same way.”

A little while later another cowboy rides into town and stops at the saloon. He sits down at the bar and says to the bartender, “I have just arrived here. What are the people like?” And the bartender asks, “What were the people like in the last town you were in?” Then the cowboy answers, “They were sour, difficult, disagreeable folk.” To which the bartender says, “I suspect you will find the people here to be the same way.” In other words, we tend to relate to others in the manner we perceive them relating to us.

One’s confidence plays a role in the way one relates. When people go into a social setting confident that they have something to offer, that they are lovable and wanted, this very confidence affects the way they relate. It is not arrogance but a healthy belief in oneself that carries with it a natural cheerfulness.

Finally, healthy relating—the kind found in healthy friendships and happy marriages—is a matter of *virtue*. Great friends, great spouses, begin as great *men* and great *women*. It is hard to be a really good friend *all the time*. That is why we seldom see it. Great lovers love even when their love is not reciprocated. That is hard to do, especially over the long haul. And loving people well means loving them virtuously, which means that all love must be based on and rooted in *truth*. Not everything that looks like love is in fact love. Indeed, there

are many things that look like love, that feel like love, that are said to be love, but are really little more than sentimentality, sensuality, and self-centeredness. Many hearts have been broken, spouses abandoned, and friends rejected by things that were done “in the name of love.” Infidelity has many faces, and none is more treacherous than the one that passes itself off as love.

Looking at the state of affairs in the world today, we might easily conclude that there is a crisis in interpersonal relating—in both friendship and in marriage. Is “crisis” too strong a word? I will let readers decide that for themselves, but one should take careful note of the findings that were reported in the June 2006 issue of the *American Sociological Review*. *ASR* is the flagship journal of the American Sociological Association. Though primarily a journal for professionals in the field of sociology, *ASR* also publishes articles of general interest. The June 2006 issue featured an article that was widely covered by the national news media. A sociological study was conducted by researchers at the University of Arizona and Duke University that replicated a study done twenty years earlier. The participants were asked to give the first name or initials of all the people, including family members, with whom they discuss “important matters.” When this question was asked in 1985, the respondents, on average, said they had three such people. When this same question was asked in 2004, the average had dropped to two. What I find particularly alarming is that one fourth of the participants indicated, even after further probing by the researcher, that they had *no one* with whom they could discuss important matters. Twenty-five percent of the population has no one to talk to about the things that really matter to them—not even a spouse or some other family member.

The experience people have of feeling disconnected affects more than friendships. Relational difficulties affect family life as well. There are many people who want to end the relationship with the person with whom they were once madly in love! Perhaps the real problem lies in their misunderstanding of genuine intimacy, and their lack of experience thereof. People today seem confused about what real intimacy is, and too often simply equate it with sex. Intimacy is a matter of really *connecting* with another—two persons deeply sharing their inner selves. It happens between two close friends, and it should happen between a husband and wife. But it often does not happen. The crisis in genuine friendship is particularly visible in the

casual sexual relationships and casual marriages that are part of today's culture. It is not uncommon to hear of marriages ending after one or two months. How can this be? Certainly, relationships vary in intensity and vary in depth. But if one's deepest friendship and one's greatest intimacy is with one's spouse, how can that relationship end after only a few months? It is incomprehensible. Where is the friendship? And when there is a lack of genuine intimacy in marriage, people can begin to look to satisfy their need for intimacy in other ways, perhaps repeating over and over their superficial or unhealthy or dysfunctional patterns of relating that only deepen their isolation and increase their loneliness.

The good news is that it does not have to be that way. We are capable of making improvements. Successful interpersonal relating—including the relating that is an integral part of marriage—is both an art and a science. God has endowed each person with gifts and talents, as well as with a temperament. That is the “science” part. But there are also *skills* of interpersonal relating that need to be acquired and, to some degree, perfected. That is the *art* side of it. I am convinced that the *art* of friendship, including the friendship of marriage, and friendship with God, offers each of us opportunities for growth. All of that, in a nutshell, is what this book is about.

The God Who Is Love Made Us in His Image

St. John writes in his first letter, “God is love.”⁴ But God is mysterious. So if God is love then love must be mysterious as well. Perhaps this is why definitions we propose for love always seem to come up short. Every definition captures an aspect of love but not love in its entirety. The attention a mother gives to her child is called love. It is commonly called *affection*. The devotion of a lifelong friend is the love of *friendship*. There is the passionate desire of *erotic* love. Jesus said there is no greater love than to lay down one's life.⁵ That is the love of *charity*. My philosophical question is whether there is some one thing that unites the four. We want to be able to point to something and say, “*That is what love is.*” We want it to be something that all of the various types of loves have in common. Is this possible? Can we say this is the true *essence* of love?

I do think it is possible, and I think we should take our cue from St. John who told us “God is love.” Though all authentic love has its origin in God, not everything our society calls “love” is divine, and