BARTOLOME DE LAS CASAS ESSAY SERIES

Ninth Essay: Friendship as the Basis of Volunteerism

By Professor Michael Pakaluk

Introduction

At first glance one might think that friendship and volunteerism are entirely distinct or even opposed. Friendship has to do with those close to us—family and friends—and with ordinary life; volunteerism is directed at people distant from us, and it typically is in response to unusual or extraordinary need. So, to propose that friendship is a good basis for volunteerism might seem paradoxical—as if someone were to suggest that staying at home was a good way of traveling abroad. And yet there is a close connection between the two, which is captured in the notion of ‘solidarity’.

There is in fact a good way and a not so good way of expressing our concern for the welfare of others, and friendship is essentially connected to the good way. This should not be surprising, because there is hardly anything more difficult than to help others well—a thing that requires a certain humility and refinement.

I am assuming of course a good motivation. Why do we volunteer? To help others. This desire to help others usually springs from ‘compassion’, which we locate in the ‘heart’. (Curiously, the Greeks referred to this as *splanchnic*, or ‘the guts’. We feel it in our guts.) The essence of this response is the realization that “he is just like me”. His suffering is mine. His relief is mine. This is not an abstract realization (“it would be better off if”) or an impartial or disinterested affection (“we’re all equal”, “each person is one among many others”), but something concrete and “heartfelt”. The origin of authentic volunteerism is this identification of another person with oneself. And yet this is just what friendship achieves and shows us as a model.

Friendship

We should first get clear about what friendship is. Now, when we want to think clearly about friendship, we should turn to the ancients—Greek and Roman civilization, and especially Aristotle. This is not arbitrary but can be reasonably defended. Each age and culture has its own special achievements. If you want to learn painting, you turn first to Renaissance Italy. If insight into music is your concern, then 18th century Vienna should be a focus. For theology, 13th century Europe has been the high point, not surpassed since. And similarly for reflection on friendship, our source should be classical literature and philosophy.

The reason is that the ancients allotted a high place to friendship and consequently put

much energy into thinking about it and analyzing it. They thought, for instance, that no one could be happy without good friendships; that a mark or necessary sign that you were a good person was that you had many, true friends. They regarded friendship as the bond which, by permeating throughout society, unified it. To stress the value of friendship, they would say that “a friend is the greatest of your possessions”, and Socrates would disarmingly ask people, “How many friends do you have?” and then chide them when you could not give an exact answer, although they could say precisely how many oxen or pigs they had—Weren’t friends much more valuable? As a kind of monument to this preoccupation with and appreciation of friendship in the ancient world, we have been left with Aristotle’s long treatment of the subject in his Ethics, and Cicero’s essay, neither of which has been superseded by anything written since.

Yet, although such extensive and truly great material on friendship has been left to us by the ancients, a roadblock confronts a modern person who wishes to understand it. The reason is that our outlook is absorbed in the subjective, which is stifling and limiting, but friendship, as explained by the ancients, begins with an appreciation of something objective and inherently expansive.

Here is a good example of this divide that separates us from the ancients. When I ask my students what they think happiness is, by far the most common response I receive is that it is a feeling—a feeling of satisfaction, which need not even be grounded in a true judgment. I may be completely deceived or completely confused, but so long as I feel content, then I am happy.

A little reflection shows this to be an absurd view. A good feeling is an emotion, a physiological euphoria, like good digestion. But happiness is what we do everything else for. Yet how absurd to suppose that our cities, civilizations, and achievements; the struggles and victories of each person; the great effort put into childbirth, upbringing, and education—that the point of all of this is that each of us have a nice feeling inside, a feeling which might just as easily be produced by a well-designed drug.

The disposition of the ancients was exactly the opposite of this. Their instinct, rather, was to hold that anything that we took as the highest object of our own striving had to be objective. Happiness was so far from being subjective for them, that they thought it likely that a person's highest good was simply the same as the highest good of the entire universe. This view comes out especially clearly in the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius, who argues straight out that happiness is God—not our possession of God, not our contemplation of God, but simply God.

One might say, "Well, those are two different outlooks, one subjective and the other objective!" and try to leave it at that. But this makes a big difference for friendship, which, because it concerns the other person's good, has to start from an objective appreciation of another.

Aristotle in fact marks out his three types of friendship based on the distinction between

objective and subjective. We have an objective appreciation of a person or thing, when we regard it as good or not, relative to what it is supposed to be. We have a subjective appreciation, when we like it or not, because of its contribution to our own interests or enjoyment. In the latter, we are not so much liking that thing, as acting out of a liking for ourselves. For instance, we may appreciate a well-made classical guitar for what it is, whether or not we have any use for it ourselves. We can appreciate a well-prepared meal, even if we are not going to taste it. Similarly, we can appreciate the goodness of someone, or the enjoyment that he takes in life, without yet expecting that our own interests will be advanced through him, or that he will contribute to our own pleasures and enjoyment.

This objective appreciation is the origin of friendship. When we appreciate something in that way, we naturally want to promote and preserve what is good about it. That attitude is itself attractive to the other and tends to be reciprocated. When both persons recognize that each appreciates the other in this way, and they recognize that they recognize it, their relationship takes on a certain stability, and if, over time, the emotions become engaged and the attitude that each has becomes well-grounded and habitual—that is, implicit, spontaneous, familiar—then they have a friendship in the true and strict sense.

This is to be contrasted with relationships in which each person is initially attracted to the other, not because of some objectively admirable trait that the other has, but because his own interests are advanced (a friendship ‘because of utility’, Aristotle calls it) or his own enjoyment is enhanced (a friendship ‘for pleasure’). For instance, someone finds himself cheered up when he spends time with his acquaintance, and that’s all that matters to

him—he does not think much about whether his getting cheered up is based on anything objectively admirable in the other.

By the way, we should not think that typically a person will be aware that he is drawn to others for subjective reasons, or that someone who approaches relationships in this way can even conceive of taking some other approach. The subjective outlook tends to be unaware of its own subjectivity.

A Friend as "Other Self"

As a true friendship develops over time, then it is correct to say, as Aristotle claims, that the friends are "other selves", that is, that each relates to the other in very much the same way as he relates to himself. And what is the reality of the relationship, because it is evidently good, also provides its ideal. That, as much as possible, one's friend has the same standing as oneself, becomes the ideal of the relationship. Friends try to increase their friendship.

That friends are "other selves" was a commonplace of Greek popular thought. That friends are "a single soul" (*mia psyche*) in two bodies was proverbial. There was the story of Orestes and Pylades, each vying to take the place of the other and be executed instead of his friend. That is why "laying down one's life" for another becomes something like the

proof of true friendship, since that sacrifice is intelligible only if you take your friend's life to have the value of your own.

A fascinating example of someone who takes this outlook very seriously are the reflections of Augustine, in book 4 of his *Confessions*, upon the death of a close friend from childhood. He grieves the loss of his friend, yet at the same time he is happy that he himself is alive. Augustine is concerned that there is something wrong about that. If a friend lays down his life for his friend, shouldn't he be upset that he is still alive, whereas his friend has died? Shouldn't he resent being still alive? But then Augustine reasons that, since friends are "other selves" and a "single soul" in two bodies, his own life just is the continuation of his friend's life. For Augustine to be alive just is the only way in which his friend continues to be alive. (At this time, before his conversion to Christianity, Augustine had no confidence in a life after death and that his friend's soul had survived death.) So, Augustine becomes reconciled to his own joy at being alive, taking this to show not a love for himself alone, but for himself through a love for his friend.

So, the willingness to "lay down one's life" can serve as a mark of whether the other was in fact an "other self". A recent story from a news report following the tsunami shows this from the opposite side. A man was being interviewed who lost his girlfriend in the wave. They were on a beach in Thailand when the tsunami struck: he managed to grab onto a tree and survived; she was swept away in the rising waters and was seen no more. Reflecting on his own good luck in being alive, the man said, "And I used to think that I

would rather die than lose my girlfriend”—a crass remark which revealed that he had never loved her.

Aristotle gives an elaborate argument that friends are “other selves”, which we need not review here. Rather, I wish to point out an important consequence that Aristotle draws from this claim. This has to do with what is the most distinctive manifestation of a friendship. What is it that friends do that is characteristic of friends, rather than of people who have other sorts of relationships with one another?

We said that the objective admiration that we have for another is the origin of friendship, because we naturally want to assist and preserve what we admire as good. We might therefore think that friendship finds its full flower in, and especially takes the form of, some kind of mutual aid or benefit. Friendship is reciprocated love, and we naturally think of love as service, as “doing good”. Friendship is a kind of activism.

But Aristotle rejects this line of thought, for two reasons. The first has to do with the inequality that is implicit in any act of aid. When X aids or benefits Y, then, to that extent, X is superior, and Y is an inferior. It is not merely that Y’s weakness or deficiency is implied by X’s benefiting him. Rather, it is that X really gets the better good and the greater benefit in the deal. As Aristotle says, when you give some material good to another, that person merely gets something useful, but you however get the goodness (call it ‘nobility’, ‘admirability’, ‘worthiness’) inherent in an act of giving. The proof is that you can claim

credit and legitimately look for gratitude or even, in some circumstances, honor, whereas the recipient can claim nothing of that sort.

This, as you may have noticed, is Aristotle's way of understanding the maxim that "It is more blessed to give than to receive." It is not frequently appreciated that that maxim has a double edge. On the one hand, the maxim urges us on to do the better but more difficult thing—to give rather than to receive. On the other hand, the maxim implies that the person who gives is the superior, because what he has done is "better", and that in any act of giving there is an inequality.

It is a curious fact that love and friendship look for reciprocation. Why is unrequited love painful? Why is a friend upset if he calls all the time, but the friend never calls him? Aristotle wishes to explain the reciprocity in friendship as in part being an attempt to make up for the equality inherent in acts of giving. People who are friends want to be "other selves". As we saw, that is the ideal of their relationship. But a person is certainly equal to himself, "other selves" and therefore friends must be equals. However, when one friend benefits another, this equality is disturbed, so it needs to be restored—which happens through the friends' reciprocation. First best would be that the friends always remain equal; but second best, if a temporary inequality is inevitable, is that the inequality is balanced out or nullified by a comparable act of benefit in the other direction.

Here a kind of paradox arises. Friends wish to be other selves, yet the most straightforward way in which each can be related to the other as he is to himself is by benefiting the other; but benefiting undermines the equality required by the ideal of “other self”. Reciprocation helps but does not fully resolve this difficulty, because when friends take turns in benefiting the other, then always one of them is superior to the other—they simply take turns in being superior.

This raises the important question, then: Is there some kind of activity, which two persons can together engage in, and in which each is related to the other as to another self, but which does not carry along with it an inequality? Yes, Aristotle say, there is: it is the activity of “living life together” (*suzên*, in Greek) or “spending time together”, which he characterizes as fundamentally a sharing in perception and thought. English has no good single word for this, but the same idea is captured in the Spanish words *conviventia* and *compania*.

C.S. Lewis, in his book *The Four Loves*, quotes Emerson as saying that the crucial question for friends is, “Do you see the same truth?” Lovers look into each other’s eyes. Friends together look at some third thing. Aristotle is in basic agreement with this but asks us to analyze what goes on when two friends enjoy seeing or thinking about something together. His analysis depends upon the principle that perception and thinking is inherently reflexive. That is to say, it is always the case, when I perceive something, that I perceive that I perceive it, and when I think something, that I think that I think it. To

perceive this blue wall over here, is at the same time to perceive that I perceive it. There is an inherent complexity, then, in our acts of consciousness.

Let us take a concrete example, to fix ideas. Suppose two friends, Pablo and Suzie, are hiking together and reach a mountaintop where they enjoy a beautiful vista. They are happy that they are seeing such a beautiful sight together. (Any account of friendship must answer the question of why, when we see something beautiful alone, we say, “If only so-and-so were here to see this with me!”, as if the experience does not fully count, unless someone else shares it with us.) What is going on as they view that beautiful scene as friends? Let us analyze it from the point of view of one of the friends, Pablo. (Of course, whatever we say holds just as well of the other friend.) Pablo perceives the vista, but because perception is reflexive, he therefore perceives that he perceives it. Suzie perceives that Pablo perceives the vista. Therefore, Suzie has the same relationship to Pablo as he does to himself. Again, Pablo perceives the vista. But he also perceives Suzie perceiving the vista. But this is to have the same relationship to Suzie as he has to himself, because when he perceives the vista, he also perceives himself perceiving the vista, because perception is reflexive.

The point may be summarized thus. The interior life of a person is inherently social, because of the reflexive nature of consciousness. When we think or perceive, we ipso *facto* have a relationship to ourselves, which is a kind of interior sociality. One might say: friendship and communion are inherent in the consciousness of an individual. This is modeled and exemplified by, and fulfilled in, our friendships with others—that is, in that

precise activity of friends called “living life together” (*conviventia*, *compania*). So simply spending time with others is the best and most characteristic manifestation of friendship, because it lacks any inherent inequalities, and it corresponds to the deepest, social nature of human life.

Friendship as Applied to Volunteerism

Thus there is a true form of friendship, which starts from an objective appreciation of what is good about another; friends of this sort aim at the ideal of “other self”; and the highest activity of such friends, because it is most expressive of this ideal, and the best realization of our inner social nature, is “spending time with another” (*conviventia*, *compania*).

But what does all of this have to do with volunteerism? A great deal, because of the strategic importance of this notion of “other self” in our lives. Recall that we said that we should presume good motivation in our efforts at volunteerism or in any sort of assistance we try to provide to others. We truly want to help others. But this implies two things: first, an ideal of what “helping others” amounts to— it is all for—and second, a sound and balanced source of motivation in doing so. We can go astray as regards both goal and origin, by misunderstanding the point of what we are doing, or by proceeding from faulty motives. Friendship is the necessary guide, support, and corrective as regards both of these things.

Friendship provides the goal or ideal of volunteerism. Presumably we do not regard it as enough to do some service and then depart, as if we were machines or slaves. Even if, practically speaking, we cannot and will not become friends in the strict sense with the others, still, we would like this to be the significance or meaning of our actions. Even a small gesture can have a much broader significance, if done with the right goal in mind. All of us know of love stories where young lovers must be separated, perhaps by the death of one of them, and as a final act they do or say something romantic, which is sufficient because it points to what they would have liked it to be. Similarly, we would want our (usually small) acts of assistance to have a meaning which extends beyond them. And if we hold up friendship as the goal or point of what we are doing, then they can have this meaning.

That friendship finds its fullest expression in “spending time with another” (*conviventia*, *compania*) proves an extremely useful principle of volunteerism, because it points the way beyond mere activism. If *conviventia* is the highest form of association, then we should be dissatisfied with conferring benefits. That relationship effectively makes the volunteer superior, typically by making salient only one aspect of their relationship, and spoils equality. Something of a corrective to this can be achieved, paradoxically, if the volunteer thinks to himself in his volunteer work, “I am getting the better good out of this; in truth I am indebted to those I am helping,” because then he can regard his volunteer work as already involving reciprocation.

But even better would be if he did not regard himself as ‘helping’ at all. The ideal of *conviventia* enables us to get beyond what might be called an exclusively ‘male’ approach to volunteerism. It’s well known to married couples that husband and wife tend to take different approaches to discussing the ordinary problems of each day. Men tend to dislike talking about a problem except to find some way of fixing it. If the thing can’t be fixed, they’d rather talk about something else. But women in contrast like to recount difficulties simply to find understanding. They want a sympathetic ear. So, the man comes home from work and grows impatient having to listen to stories about problem he cannot do anything about, whereas his wife is upset at his impatience, because she never intended that he ‘fix’ anything but just show some understanding. *Conviventia* is a shared understanding, and this can similarly sometimes be the most important thing achieved in volunteer work.

Solidarity may in fact be defined just as this attitude toward others, informed by relevant knowledge, and made habitual -- woven into the fabric of our daily life and incorporated into the way we think and feel about things.

But this then raises the issue of motivation. How can we succeed in consistently approaching volunteer work in this way, with perseverance and a cheerful attitude? The problems that most volunteers face are huge and potentially depressing, requiring persistence and perseverance over the long haul, and even eventually a transformation of society and culture. But we are human beings, not disinterested angels, and we must

address these problems, given the nature that we have, not simply by willing to deal with them. How can we do so without ‘burn out’, becoming disillusioned, or giving up in despair? And here friendship provides the source as well as the goal of volunteerism. As the old saying goes, frequently quoted by Mother Teresa, “Charity begins at home.” This means not merely that there is an ‘order of charity’ (*ordo caritatis*), according to which those closest to us should have a prior place than strangers in our affections and commitments, and that we should not be like those people who love humanity but happen to hate all of the human beings around them. Rather, the maxim also means that our good intentions can be well-grounded and safeguarded, over the long haul, when they are the extension to others of true friendships that we have proven ourselves capable of cultivating within our family and among those close to us.

We may turn in conclusion to the puzzle I raised at the beginning: What does friendship, something ordinary and familiar, have to do with volunteerism, which deals with the extraordinary and those distant from us? And here we have a case in which the extremes really do meet. A care for those closest to us, and a love for others generally, are at bottom two manifestations of the same thing. This was well captured in a remark by G.K. Chesterton, who once said that the best way of testing a person’s capacity to get along with the general run of humanity, would be to pick some house at random, send him down the chimney, and see how well he can get along with the people inside. And that, Chesterton says, is exactly what happens on the day each of us is born. And thus, it is that the love of those close to us, friendship, and the love of those distant, volunteerism, is one and the same.

North American Educational Initiatives Foundation, Inc.

www.naeif.org

Copyright © 1999-2025 All Rights Reserved