

Prioritizing relationships

The longing for true relationships, the nostalgia for a deep connection with others, spreads throughout every culture and every age in history. Take as an example this excerpt of a letter written by a soldier in 1933 to his fiancée:

“Theresa, dear, why don’t you write me sometime more intimately about yourself, what your opinion on things is, what you think about, what your interests are, anything at all so that I can feel I am closer to you when I read your letters, something that will reveal you yourself, in all your charm and sweetness, just say anything at all as long as it concerns you and I will love it” (Letter from Alexander Goode, 1933, to his fiancée Theresa).

Besides this desire for mutual knowledge and love, for spiritual intimacy, there is another longing: the aspiration to belong to a group, to be part of something bigger than our individual existence. Whenever I invite students to a Camp or Retreat, they want to know, above all, who else is going. The single thing we pay most attention to when we come into a new setting is: will someone there know me, acknowledge that I exist? Will others pay attention to me or ignore me? Will I matter in that group?

A friend in the navy told of the case of a young officer who was assigned to a ship, but nobody seemed to pay attention to him. A few weeks later he requested to transfer. He said: “Since nobody seems to care that I am part of this crew, I don’t care to be part of it either.”

All of these instances reflect the fact that we were created for deep relationships. We were created in the image of God. And God, being One, is at the same time a dynamic relationship of three Divine Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Being one, He is not a lonely God or an isolated God, but an Eternal Life of self-giving, surrender, trust and abandonment between Divine Persons. We are created as individuals but not as self-sufficient. We need one another to be ourselves. We need to give of ourselves and to be open to others in order to find our true identity.

In fact, God has created us to participate in His divine life, in the exchange of love and truth between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That’s what we call Heaven. That intimacy with God. That belonging to Him. Maybe we are tempted to think: “Is that heaven? Wouldn’t that be boring? I prefer my PlayStation, or a cruise . . .” I don’t agree. And, as Jesus says to the Samaritan woman, “If you knew the gift of God,” you wouldn’t agree with that viewpoint either. I don’t agree but I can relate to it from a personal experience that I would like to share.

I recall quite clearly being 6 or 7 years old. I had a bunch of older cousins. All of us came together regularly for family reunions. And I saw them talking with friends for hours, talking about girls . . . And I was thinking then: “How boring! What is so interesting about talking for hours? What do they see in girls? Don’t they have any fun games? I’m glad I brought my Nintendo to this reunion.”

Time went by. I grew up, I reached the age of 13, 14, 15, and I recalled that thought of my childhood. Who was right, my cousins or I? Of course they were! I said to myself: now I understand! My world was too narrow. I was too young to get it before. Talking to friends is awesome. I didn't find girls boring any more either.

The same happens in the faith. When we are like spiritual infants we cannot tell what is good. Mass? Boring! Prayer? Being with God? Heaven? No, please, give me something fun! I would say exactly the same thing that I would say to myself when I was seven if I could go back on a time machine: just wait until you grow up a bit. You yourself will realize what is good.

The work of the Holy Spirit, throughout our life, is to help us mature, grow in wisdom and in love, so that when we enter Heaven, the most awesome feast imaginable, we can actually understand it and enjoy it. If you bring a seven-year-old to the most incredible wedding feast, they would rather go to watch TV. They are not ready for it. They miss the point. If we are not spiritually mature, we won't get it!

How can we help the work of the Holy Spirit? Prioritize true relationships. Don't shy away from them. Don't say: my life is about sports, or about grades, or about making good business. Don't kid yourself. We are made for true relationships, with God and with others. If we relate well to others, we'll also grow in our ability to relate to God.

What does it mean to prioritize relationships?

Time. Give time to them. How much time do I pray? How frequently? How much do I call my friends? How often do I organize a get together, to invite classmates or people at work? Summer is coming and planning: let us not think not only in terms of what I want as an individual. Think in terms of others. What am I going to do to spend quality time with others? What time will I give to my family, to my friends, to my girlfriend, to my grandparents?

Confidence to open up. To be in true relationships, I need to let the Lord and others know who I am. I cannot be a mystery. They have to know how I feel, what I think, what I need. I need to trust them enough to open up and share something personal with them, as Alexander was requesting from his fiancée. Otherwise, relationships do get boring, superficial, unfulfilling. Is your conversation with others fulfilling? Why?

Selflessness. To prioritize relationships means that not only what is important to me counts. I have to make space in my mind, my feelings, my time, my budget, my plans, for those things that are important for others. Being at a kid's baseball game may be completely irrelevant for me, but it's the world for my kid. Making it to Sunday Mass or not may feel the same to me, but it's the world for Jesus. This is very important, because when something means the world to me, I also take it seriously. And if someone doesn't care for it, it almost feels that they don't care for me.

May our receiving the Lord in the Eucharist today help us in our ability to give time to relationships, to open up and to be selfless. May it help us grow in spiritual maturity, in

our ability to give of our ourselves, even to lose ourselves, so that we may find our true identity. So that we may find where we belong, where our deepest nostalgia is sated, in that true fountain of life and bliss that circulates among the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.