

SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

BEING A GUARDIAN OF THE SOUL



In a culture where the term friend can refer to casual acquaintances, Facebook contacts, or life-long companions, it is imperative that we recover the deeper meaning of this word.

Aelred of Rievaulx was a Cistercian monk who became abbot of the monastery of Rievaulx (England) in 1147 and remained spiritual father of that community until his death in 1163. He wrote several influential books on spirituality including *On Spiritual Friendship*. In this book he defines a friend as “a guardian of love” or “a guardian of the spirit itself.” (I.20) In an earlier book he suggests that just as there is a continuous dialogue and interchange of love between the three persons of the Trinity, so people are called into relationship based on mutual dialogue, sharing and self-giving. This is the theological foundation for all spiritual relationships.

Spiritual friends (a particular kind of friendship) can be defined as someone who helps another pay close attention to God; they remind each other that in friendship there are three persons involved: “Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, in our midst.” (I.1).

Not everyone should be admitted into this kind of friendship. Aelred suggests four qualities which must be tested in a friend: “Loyalty, right intention, discretion, and patience.” (III.61). These qualities can be discerned by asking several questions in the initial stages of friendship:

- ♦ What kind of relationship do we intend to establish?
- ♦ Do we treat the other reasonably or are we just using them?
- ♦ Are we moderate about the demands we make of the other?
- ♦ Do we value this relationship as gift or are we seeking some other reward? (II.59-61)

After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself... Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself...

[And after Saul tried to kill David] Jonathan said, "Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the Lord, saying, 'The Lord is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever.'" (1 Samuel 18:1-4, 20:42)



Spiritual friendship is an ancient form of communal guidance and prayer support. It may take the form of finding another person as a spiritual companion with whom you can listen for the promptings of the God, formally or informally; and it may also take the form of family prayer and sharing or a small support group (Groff).

Excerpts from “Aelred of Rievaulx: On Spiritual Friendship”
<http://www.catholicireland.net/spirituality/general/490-aelred-of-rievaulx-on-spiritual-friendship>



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