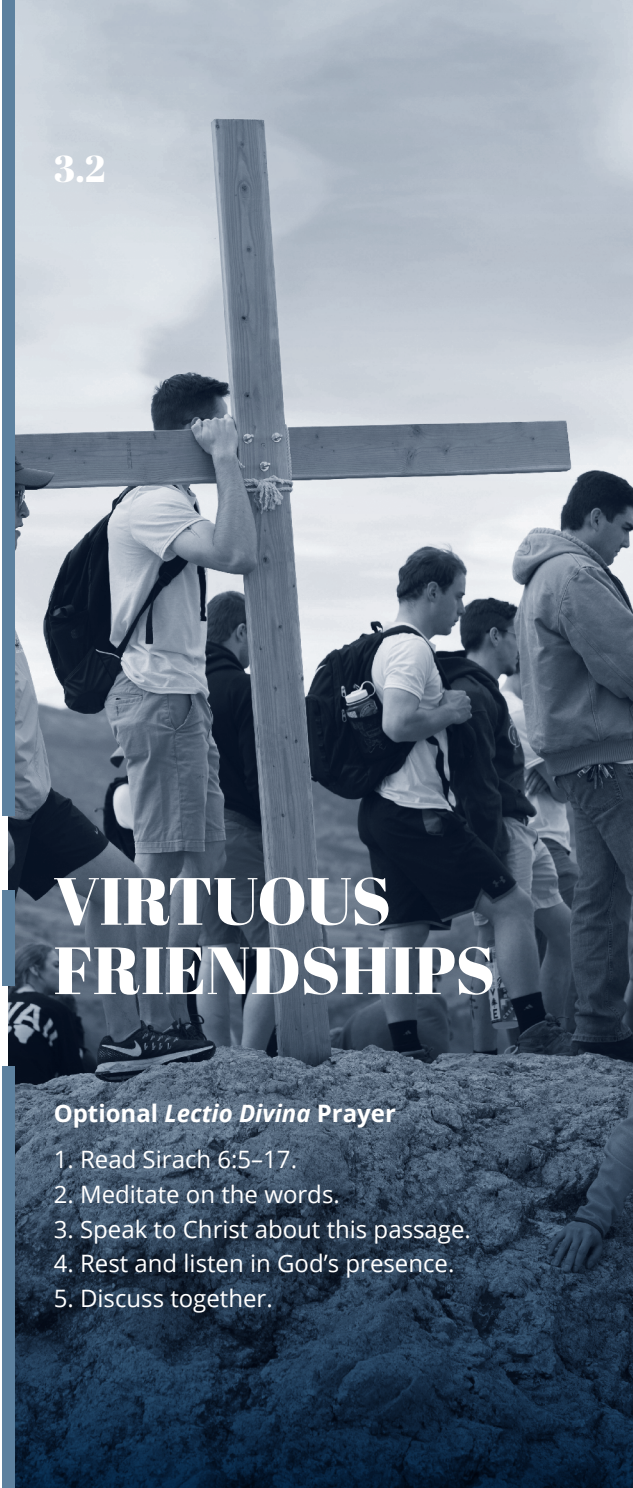
FELLOWSHIP

3.2



VIRTUOUS FRIENDSHIPS

Optional *Lectio Divina* Prayer

1. Read Sirach 6:5–17.
2. Meditate on the words.
3. Speak to Christ about this passage.
4. Rest and listen in God's presence.
5. Discuss together.

Notes

On a cold night in the fourth century A.D., forty young Roman soldiers huddled together while immersed in a freezing lake.

Licinius, the pagan emperor, was persecuting them for their Christian faith. As a result, they now faced death and the biggest temptation of their lives: They could go free at any moment if they chose to worship the pagan gods. As an added enticement, the lake was directly across from the Roman baths. As the soldiers' bodies shook and their teeth chattered, they could see the steam from the hot pools rising into the freezing air. In the midst of this torture, the soldiers had one unified prayer: "Lord, we are forty engaged in this contest. Grant that forty may receive crowns and that we may not fall short of that sacred number."[1]

Throughout the night, this band of brothers was tempted to give in. Unable to resist any longer, one soldier headed for the baths only to die instantly upon arrival. One of the guards who was keeping watch was so moved by their witness that he removed his clothes and joined them in the icy lake. All forty of these remained faithful unto death, an answer to the men's prayer.

The story of these soldiers served as an inspiration to the power of Christian fellowship throughout the Roman Empire, and they were immortalized by the Catholic Church as the Martyrs of San Sebaste.

DISCUSS

What stands out to you in this story? What do you think allowed these men to remain faithful?

HOT COALS

The friendships of these men allowed them to remain heroically faithful to Christ. You most likely won't find yourself in the same

Notes

A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter: he that has found one has found a treasure.

— Sirach 6:14



situation as these Roman soldiers, but you need Christian friendship just as much as they did. If you don't have close friends who are Christians, there's a good chance you won't grow in your relationship with Christ.

Think about a charcoal fire. When the coals are piled together, each coal remains hotter for a longer period. The coals help each other remain on fire. Conversely, when a coal becomes separated from the others, it cools more quickly. Like hot coals, we need other Christians around us to remain "on fire" for Christ.

The Martyrs of San Sebaste in that freezing lake were like a group of hot coals. There had to be countless times when the men wanted to go to shore, overwhelmed by the frigid conditions. They surely thought of their families, their wives, and their children. But because they were together, these men were able to encourage and support one another. When they were tempted to renounce Christ, someone was there to remind them of the heavenly crown that awaited them. As a group, these men were able to remain faithful, something that might have been impossible if they didn't have support from one another.

DISCUSS

Do you have "hot coals" in your life? Are you a "hot coal" for others?

THREE KINDS OF FRIENDSHIPS

Notes

Since the very beginning of the Church, the early Christians considered fellowship to be one of four foundational practices of the Christian life (Acts 2:42). We need this same habit in our own lives. But how do we experience this kind of friendship? The first step is to know what kind of friends we are looking for and what kind of friends we need to be.

Many people in our lives claim to have some type of friendship with us, but do we have friends who are committed to us and to what's truly best for us? Do we have friends who will push us in the right direction?

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle taught that there are three kinds of friendships.[2]

- ***Friendship of Utility***

  The first type is a *friendship of utility*, one based on some benefit or advantage found in the relationship. Business relationships, group projects in class, and other transactional exchanges often fall under this category. Think about your favorite coffee shop: You go there because you enjoy the coffee, and the coffee shop serves you because they make money. You might get to know the people working there. They might sincerely take an interest in your life and engage in friendly conversation with you. These basic levels of friendship are common in life. But the relationship is primarily built on the benefit the coffee shop receives from you (business) and the benefit you receive from the coffee shop (good coffee).

- ***Friendship of Pleasure***

  The second type of friendship is *friendship of pleasure*, one based primarily on the fun times two people share together. For example, two people might happen to live near each other,

play on the same team, visit the same restaurant, or belong to the same parish. They might like the same music, the same sports team, the same television show, or the same party scenes. These kinds of friendships are based primarily on the fun they have spending time with each other.

While these first two types of friendships are not bad in themselves, Aristotle notes how they are the most fragile and least likely to last the test of time, because these friends are not committed to the other as a person, seeking what's best for them. These friends are more committed to the benefit, pleasure, or fun time they get from the relationship. For example, when your classes or interests change, you shift roles or locations at work or you are no longer involved in the same activities or frequenting that particular coffee shop, your friendship is not likely to continue. The benefit or fun times are no longer there, so unless there's something deeper uniting you, you are unlikely to share a deeply committed friendship.

While these basic forms of friendships are common in life, especially when we are young, it's important to know that they often dissolve when life grows difficult and the friendship no longer brings the enjoyment, fun times, benefit, or convenience that the other person is looking for. You can probably think of examples of these kinds of friendships in your own life and how quickly some of them have come and gone.

- ***Virtuous Friendship***

  According to Aristotle, the third kind of friendship is friendship in the fullest sense. He calls it *virtuous friendship*. This is based on something much deeper: The friend is committed to *you* and *your* good, not just to some benefit or enjoyment that they receive from being with you. The virtuous friend loves you in the true sense of the word: *They seek what is best for you*, which is to live a virtuous life in imitation of Christ and eventually live forever with him in heaven. As Christians, this is the highest form of fellowship and should be our aim in our own friendships.

Notes

> For a virtuous friendship to develop, both people must be striving for virtue. They don't need to be perfect, but they do need to be pursuing the virtuous life together. They also need to be involved in each other's lives. Simply clicking "friend" on social media or interacting through screens is not how virtuous friendships form. In Christian friendships, when both people are striving to deepen their relationship with God and live like Christ, they help each other in what matters most in life. A true friend wants you to live out your faith to the fullest. Because of this, it is essential for you to find brothers and sisters in Christ who can help ensure that your faith not only survives but thrives.

DISCUSS

Which friendships in your life are virtuous friendships? Which ones are merely friendships of utility or pleasure?

"AS IRON SHARPENS IRON"

We can, of course, have different levels of friendship with people in different areas of life, regardless of whether they are Christian. While not every single friendship we have needs to be the deepest friendship, we want to make sure we do have close Christian friends who are running after the same goals, friends who can help strengthen us in our faith. After all, we become like the people we associate with most. And that challenges us to ask an important question: Are our closest friends going to help us become the kind of people we want to become?

Proverbs 27:17 says, "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another." When a sword gets dull, it cannot be sharpened easily; it takes another iron tool to sharpen it back into precision. In our own lives, we need strong, virtuous friends who can help us smooth the rough edges of our faults and sharpen us in virtue. And a sword is an excellent analogy for the battle each one of us must face in

Notes



keeping the faith: If we allow our faith to grow dull and weak, we are going to snap under the pressure of this world. However, if we have fellowship, we will be sharp enough not only to resist temptation but to grow even stronger.

Over and over, we see this dynamic played out in the lives of the saints. It's been said that saints come in clusters: Whenever you read about a saint, you discover that they rarely became a saint on their own. Usually, other saints were right by their side, sharpening them in the process. Their intense fellowship spurred them to pursue a deeper holiness and increased their desire to share Jesus with others, even in difficult circumstances. St. Francis Xavier had St. Ignatius of Loyola; St. Teresa of Avila had St. John of the Cross; St. Felicity had St. Perpetua. Whom do you have? Finding virtuous friends can help you get to heaven and make a deeper impact for Christ here on earth.

Sometimes, we are also called to make changes in our friendships. If the people we are spending time with aren't leading us closer to Christ — if they aren't "sharpening" us — we might have to make some tough decisions. While we shouldn't abandon these friends, we can't allow them to lead us away from the Faith, either. This might require us to change the amount of time we spend with these friends or change the activities we do with them. Also, we may not be able to rely on these friends in the most important areas of our lives because they aren't yet thinking with the mind of Christ. This process of change can be difficult, but as Christians, we need friends who will make us sharper, not duller.

We can certainly invite our non-Catholic friends to experience the love of Christ themselves. We have a unique opportunity to call these friends to conversion. How much better it is when these friends get to hear the Gospel from someone they know and trust! And how beautiful it is when our non-Christian friends come to know Jesus and become friends who can also help us draw closer to him!

Notes

DISCUSS

Are you and your friends helping each other become saints? How so? Do you need to make any changes in your friendships?

TAKE ACTION

Make a plan for better fellowship. Now that you've read about what constitutes virtuous friendship and Christian fellowship, take steps to develop these relationships in your life. Take some time to reflect on these two questions, and make a plan for improving your friendships:

- ***Which relationships need to grow?*** Who is helping me become a saint, and how can I spend more time with this person/these people?
- ***Which relationships might need to change?*** How are other friendships in my life holding me back from a life of virtue? What changes should I make? How can I invite these friends to virtuous friendship instead of merely friendships of utility or pleasure?

Notes

KEY CONCEPTS

Hot Coals Analogy: Like hot coals, we need other Christians for us to remain "on fire" for Christ.

Aristotle's Three Kinds of Friendship:

- ***Friendship of Utility***: Friendship based on some benefit the person gets from you
- ***Friendship of Pleasure***: Friendship based on enjoyment or "fun times" someone shares with you
- ***Virtuous Friendship***: Friendship based not on what someone gets from you, but on a commitment to you as a person and seeking what is best for you, which is the virtuous life

Iron Sharpens Iron: "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another" (Prov 27:17).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

True Friendship: Where Virtue Becomes Happiness by John Cuddeback

The Four Loves by C.S. Lewis

Notes

[1] Bert Ghezzi, *Voices of the Saints* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2009), 225.

[2] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross, VIII.3, last modified 2009, http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html.

Notes