

Homily on The Vine and the Branches – Cliques – True Friendship

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By Deacon Mick Irving

I was looking at Christian cartoons the other day and came across one that showed a pastor standing at the pulpit saying: “Now, while the music plays, please shake hands with two people who aren’t in your clique!” The term “clique” generally has a negative connotation, but there are some positives too. It really depends on which group you join.

When I was 19, living almost 3,000 miles away from home, and struggling with a strong need for friendship and belonging, I had to make a decision—which group should I get involved with?

There were a number of groups: The athletes, the nerds, the ones who used drugs or alcohol or were promiscuous. These are the decisions our young people will have to make. Which group should I hang out with? What direction is that group headed?

Now, I know some of you young people must be asking yourselves, “Were there really cliques or groups like that in the 20th Century!” Well, yes actually there were - as it says in Ecclesiastes:

What has been, will be again; what has been done, will be done again, there is nothing new under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

Now, if I were to give you young people advice I would give you that from Saint Don Bosco:

Listen to the words of the Holy Spirit. He that walks with the wise shall be wise. A friend of fools shall become like to them. Fly from bad companions as from the bite of a poisonous snake. If you keep with good companions I can assure you that you will one day rejoice with the blessed in heaven; whereas, if you keep with those who are bad, you will become bad yourself, and you will be in danger of losing your soul.

I think that is good advice. After the 4:00 p.m., Mass, a parishioner related that her father used to say: “Tell me who your friends are and I’ll tell you who you are.” That is a very wise and pithy way of saying what Saint Don Bosco said.

Now, returning to that period of loneliness and confusion, I consulted a priest and he recommended that I read Sirach 6:5-17 on **true friendship**.

A pleasant voice multiplies friends, and a gracious tongue multiplies courtesies. Let those that are at peace with you be many, but let your advisers be one in a thousand. When you gain a friend, gain him through testing, and do not trust him hastily. For there is a friend who is such at his own convenience, but will not stand by you in your day of trouble. And there is a friend who changes into an enemy, and will disclose a quarrel to your disgrace. And there is a friend who is a table companion, but will not stand by you in your day of trouble. 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. A faithful friend is an elixir of life; and those who fear the Lord will find him. (Sirach 6:5-17 Revised Standard Version)

Ahh!—so what is the key to joining a clique or group? True friendship and fear of the Lord! The dictionary defines “clique” as: “...a small group of people, with shared interests or other features in common, who spend time together and do not readily allow others to join them.” Yet, as I have indicated, some cliques have positive attributes.

Establishing a bond with a solid group of friends...can bring happiness...People in a clique have similar hobbies, interests, or personalities. Being around people like ourselves can make us feel comfortable...Cliques can also serve as a support system. When you are in need, when you are stressed, when you are sick or hurt, your “group” is there for you...Great friendships can be established, and these friendships can often get us through the most difficult times.

But, in the Church, we must be careful about cliques because some, by their very nature, have the potential to divide people and foster an atmosphere of exclusivity. They can become negative and gossip driven. We should make friends with like-minded people, but we can’t lose focus on the goal.

Just imagine a group of people walking in a circle, one behind the other with signs on their backs that read “Follow me”. That group is not going anywhere. It doesn’t produce fruit. Christ doesn’t move in a circle—He moves straight toward His Father. So, if you ever get the impression that the group or clique you identify with is walking in a circle, feeding only itself, you have probably joined the wrong group.

It is really not the signs on their backs that say “follow-me” that are the problem; it is the direction they are headed. If you think about it, all of us, priests, deacons, and all parishioners, really ought to wear a sign that reads “Follow me to Jesus Christ.”

When my family was preparing to return from Europe in 1995, we had four or five options of places to move. We chose Rapid City, South Dakota, because we had heard and read much about Bishop Charles Chaput, about his authenticity, faithfulness, candor and courage. When we arrived in South Dakota and eventually met Bishop Chaput (who is all the things we had heard him to be) I told him that we chose his diocese for the reasons I have indicated. The bishop expressed gratitude for our confidence in him, but then issued a gentle rebuke. He said, “Never put your faith in a man. Put your faith only in the one who never fails— our Savior Jesus Christ. Truly, if he hadn’t been leading the way to Christ, we would not have followed him.

As you travel through life, make sure those wearing the signs “follow-me” are transparent enough that you can see through them to Jesus, who walks ahead of them. If they are opaque and you have a hard time seeing Christ through them, **move**. Keep your eyes on Christ.

As our Gospel today reminds us, bearing fruit for Christ requires that we remain firmly and faithfully attached to the vine, who is Christ.

I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit.

Using modern day parlance, if you unplug a computer, its battery may work for a while because of stored energy, but it will ultimately shut down. The computer is good for nothing. It must have an electrical connection to sustain it. Even if a tree limb breaks due to wind and storm, it will stay alive, and produce fruit, as long as it remains attached to the tree. A person or a group of people who are made to suffer pain and misfortune for following Jesus Christ are the ones being powerfully pruned—bearing the most fruit for God. As we read in 1 Peter:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right? But even if you do suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence; and keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Peter 3:14-17)

Shortly after the Berlin Wall fell, I was sent to Prague as part of a Military to Military advisory team. We were there to discuss how our military operates within our Constitution. They wanted this information because the new Czech Republic was in the process of building its own constitution.

When I had time off, I went searching for the Miraculous Infant Jesus of Prague. I couldn't read any of the signs, nor did I speak the language, and only a few people spoke English. Those that did speak English didn't have any idea where the Church was located. So, I walked many miles all over the city, but ultimately, and by God's grace, I found the Church.

Later I went to a large basilica in downtown Prague and, when I entered that Church, there was only a small group of about 15 people worshipping together. I was struck by the radiance of this group. I couldn't put my finger on it, but there was something very special about these people. I wanted to be near them. Some people glow, even if Choice Hotels doesn't think so!

At any rate, when I returned to the hotel, I told the Czech interpreter about my visit to the Church and the beautiful people I saw there and that I was surprised there were so few people in the Church. He said he didn't want to talk about it. That piqued my interest and I asked why he didn't. He said: "It hurts our hearts." He eventually explained that most everybody in Prague knew those people and it hurts their hearts to see them. He said that during the Communist domination, those were the people who stood against the atheistic and brutal regime. They suffered black listings, persecutions, even starvation. They kept their focus on Christ and demonstrated they were willing to follow Him no matter what. He said: "That is why, when we see them, we don't want to talk about it, because it hurts our hearts. We are ashamed that we didn't do as they did and that we didn't support them."

So, when joining a group, be sure you are joining the right one—In keeping with the theme from Sirach, let those groups that are at peace with you be many, but through true friendship, join the one in a thousand that remains firmly and faithfully attached to the vine, the one that produces much fruit for Christ and the one that follows Christ no matter what. *Let us pray:*

Most high and glorious God, cast your light into the darkness of our hearts. Give us right faith, firm hope, perfect charity and profound humility with wisdom and perception, that we may do what is truly Your holy will and produce much fruit for Your Kingdom. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.