

1991: ST. MICHAEL'S CONFERENCE SERMON

*Ye are my friends if ye do whatsoever I command you...Henceforth
I call you not servants, for the servant knoweth not what his master doeth.
But I have called you friends, for all that I have heard of my Father,
I have made known unto you.
John 15:14&15*

Jesus makes us his friends. Friendship is chiefly what this Conference is about. We have come together over these past six days so that we may learn to become the very best of Christian friends. If someone was to ask me about the purpose of the St. Michael's Conference, I might very well respond by saying that all we do here is help you develop Christian friendship.

Why do you suppose we clergy would be so eager that you develop Christian Friendship? Why would we take a week from our parishes, lose countless hours of sleep, and teach all of these courses on Scripture, theology and spirituality just to help you become better Christian friends? Surely you have friends at home. What has friendship - even friendship among Christians - got to do with all the courses you've taken this week and all the worship services you've attended? If we wanted you to develop your friendships, why didn't we simply provide the meals, forget the courses, and just let you roam about the camp whenever and however you wanted? Surely something would have developed. But instead we have a structured programme of study and prayer in which we encourage learning and holiness, knowledge and love. We do this because of what is necessary if true friendship is ever to take place.

What is required for people to be friends? The first thing required is common ground. There must be something in common and a certain equality between two people if there is going to be friendship. The second thing required for friendship is that the two persons who would be friends know each other. You can't be friends with someone, you can't love someone, you don't know. It's impossible. We can only love what we know. This is why the expression "falling in love" is so silly. You can fall into a sort of infatuation with someone, and this can, believe me, happen at any age. But you can only love someone whom you know. Your love, your friendship, can only grow as your knowledge of that person grows.

Friendship also requires virtue. This becomes obvious when we think for a moment what it really means to be someone's friend. If you're not virtuous, but only want to use someone in order to satisfy your greed, lust, or ego, you are not really that person's friend. Being a true friend means honestly loving another person, which means that you desire for them only what is for their own good. It means that you're considerate, patient, kind, and loyal. These are all good and positive virtues, and without them, you cannot really be someone's friend.

If all of this is true of human friendship, what would we say about friendship with God? How is it possible to be friends with God? First of all, where is the equality? Where's the common ground? How can we have anything in common with an eternal and infinite God? We can't! But God can and does establish common ground with us. God the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, took our human nature and "was made man". Our Lord Jesus, who is both God and man, establishes common ground between God and men. We may have a friendship with Our Lord Jesus Christ and it is through him that we may have friendship with God.

You can only love what you know. In Jesus we may know God. Jesus said "I have called you friends for all that I have heard of my father I have made known unto you". God has made Himself known to us in Our Lord Jesus Christ, and because we may know Him we may love Him.

We have also said that friendship requires virtue. What virtues are required for friendship with God? Jesus answers this question in the passage from St. John's Gospel which I read a few moments ago. Our Lord Jesus told us: "Ye are my friends if you do everything that I command you".

What kind -of friendship is that? How can anyone say this to us? What sort of friend would say this to another friend? "You're my friend if you do everything I command you". Well, the only friend who could say this to us is a friend who actually knows us better than we can possibly know ourselves and who loves us more than we can possibly love ourselves. Our Lord Jesus, who is both God and man, is just this sort of friend. Jesus knows us absolutely and loves us absolutely. By obeying Him, we are doing what is really for our greatest good, whether or not we realize it at the time. This also means that the more we love Jesus - the better friend of Jesus we become - the more virtuous, the more loving, the more faithful, the more generous, the kinder, the gentler, the more Christlike we will become. In other words, the closer we draw to Jesus, the better friend we're able to be for one another.

This is why friendship is the theme of this conference. The courses which are taught are offered in order to help us better know God in Christ. The more we come to know God, the better able we are to love Him. The friendship we have with God calls us to obey Him by living more faithful Christian lives. The more faithful we are in our Christian lives, the better friends we are able to be with one another.

Our Conference concludes for this year with a service of Holy Communion in which we give thanks for the Grace of God in His servant St. Michael the Archangel. St. Michael shows us the great spiritual battle to which we are all called. Our friendship with God calls us to battle against sin, the flesh, and the devil. This is a great spiritual battle for which we must be armed with those virtues which friendship requires.

We sincerely hope that you will maintain your friendships with one another throughout the year. We hope that your friendships will better enable you to grow and "be more faithful in your Christian life. We hope that you will grow in your friendship with God through our Lord Jesus so that you may learn to be better, more loving friends with one another.

We will pray for each one of you. We care deeply about you all and will uphold you in our thoughts and prayers. Let us draw near now and receive by faith our Lord Jesus Christ in this Holy Communion. Let us love Him, and by loving Him learn how to properly love one another. Let us rejoice in the friendship to which we have been called. In Christ Jesus we may know God. Because we know God we may love Him. Jesus said: "I have called you friends because all that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you." AMEN

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