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Between Us

BY JERRY SCHROEDER

Between the three of us, two Capuchins and a lay woman, a table has been set for the last seven years. Each of us brings to it the daily bread of her or his life. We come to it as Franciscans to live simply and contemplatively. We come as celibates. The conversation between us has been nourishing and liberating. It also has broken down under misunderstanding, forgetfulness, irresponsibility and just plain tiredness — and probably will in the future. We keep mending and deepening through prayer, play and a common ministry to the spiritual needs of the urban poor. The following reflections on intimacy and celibacy come from our conversations — a little bread from our table to yours.

Ours is obviously not a typical Capuchin community. It goes beyond collaboration with the laity in ministry. It also goes beyond traditional gender boundaries. There is risk in this, but we have found it to be worth the risk. Since the beginning, conversation between men and women has been problematic. But, by God's design, a promise endures — a hope to one day bring to birth a genuinely human way of being on this earth beyond gender stereotypes and the ancient battles between the sexes. The conversation between man and woman has been no less problematic. Fraternal life is a demanding conversation. To be brothers and sisters to one another, beyond the divisions of clericalism, race, age and class, is more of a challenge now than ever.

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In the midst of challenges, we affirm that, despite numerous failures, the human heart cannot help but seek intimacy — a closeness with another that will grow and deepen into eternity. The desire for intimacy comes from God and is meant to lead back to God. Though not equal to God, humans are invited into what Scotus called a superfriendship with the One who loves us infinitely and excessively. Within this divine embrace, humans can reach a real presence to one another.

A question inevitably arises. How do we know that what is going on between us is real or true intimacy? What are the signs? We offer a few.

True intimacy is liberating. The Capuchin Constitutions speak to this by encouraging friendship as "a great gift that fosters human and spiritual growth". And, "we should avoid binding others to ourselves, rather let us give ourselves to them". (172) At the heart of understanding (the pain and possibility of) human intimacy is the choice we have to bind or free another. Whenever we invite someone into our life, we risk the loss of our freedom and they do theirs. But if we invite no one, we risk emotional and spiritual death. Because many fear hurt, they choose not to risk intimacy.

Forgiveness becomes essential to cultivating intimates in our lives. Communal life and friendships rise and fall on how willing we are to invite others into our lives and then to stay at table with them. The degree of sharing will naturally vary from person to person and from time to

time. Conflicts arise. We lose patience with others and with ourselves. Too often in conversation with our selves, we become drained and bruised. Intimacy with another will always depend on self-intimacy — a slow, gentle coming to be at home with oneself.

Intimacy, then, is a school for self-understanding. We grow into our true selves. We learn to be less governed by our fears and more by love. We're less hesitant to share our needs, and begin to feel safe doing so. Gradually, we learn to filter what is said so that bonds between us are not broken. Saying "I'm sorry" becomes a little easier for some, and — for others — less necessary. New forms of creativity begin to show. Talents, once hidden, are unearthed and polished for further use. We begin to find our true voice and learn how to use it. We no longer have to play games with ourselves and with others.

The poet, Richard Wilbur, wrote that everything we do (and are) is touched by ocean; still, we remain on the shore of what we know. Not to grow in self-intimacy, we risk becoming lepers to ourselves and to others. Lepers lose all sensory feeling, including pain, as they begin to lose segments of their beliefs. So it is with someone who has lost touch with him/herself. Worn away inside, distance is kept from others on the outside. What a gift of God it was when Francis, the "leper", kissed the leper and discovered a self he never knew.

Intimacy works best through grateful hearts. "Thank you", said sincerely and often, touches others in gentle, nurturing

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ways. It builds bonds by weaving small threads of recognition into lasting ties. Like ordinary salt and pepper, it spices our conversations across the table of our life.

In our culture, however, the taste for true intimacy is dulled by reducing it to genital sexual activity. A true exchange of hearts is harder to come by. Alienated and fragmented in spirit, our conversations are like fast food: uniform, on the run and too easy. Malnourished and hurting, we pay untold sums for healing and inner peace.

In this context, celibates have a unique challenge to find and nurture intimate relationships. We must avoid being seduced into reducing intimacy to genital sexual expression. The word "intercourse" used to mean much more than just a genital activity. It originally included many forms of human interaction or conversation. For those friars old enough to remember table reading of the Rule of St. Francis, Chapter XI on how the friars are to relate to women, it read: "...All the friars are not to have any suspicious intercourse with women..." Somehow the word "intercourse", along with our notion of human sexuality, has so shrunk that it no longer carries enough meaning to allow room for real human intimacy. Celibates, along with everyone else in this culture, suffer from the reduction of intimacy to sexual activity.

Intimacy and celibacy certainly belong together at our table. We are working out the "how" as best we can. In the past, such talk died quickly in uneasy laughter, or was stopped through silence. But there are signs of hope. Healthy, longstanding friendships flourish and are encouraged among us. The old training to fear "particular" friendships has given way to our new constitutions which actually encourage friendship. Look at our lives or, should we say loves; consider those we call close, and give thanks.

A friar once remarked, "Some brothers never miss mass, and they never miss me." We could insert instead of the word "mass" any number of other things today. We choose how close or how distant to be to ourselves, to God and to others. The table of life is set with these three conversations. At this table, we can either starve or flourish.

In closing, comes a blessing from this little table to yours: may you in all seasons, in cold climates or warm, whether old or young, always and everywhere flourish.

Dwelling Place Retreat Center is a ministry among the poor of Milwaukee, and is staffed by Jerry Schroeder, Francis Dombrowski, and Mary Klotz.

On Being Held

BY JERRY SCHROEDER

*When done too tightly,
I find no rest.*

*When too lightly,
I feel like an unwelcome
guest.*

*Those who free me,
hold me best.*