

# We need the saints to teach us about friendship



As I looked ahead on the liturgical calendar recently, the shared feast of Sts. Peter and Paul got me thinking about friendship – theirs, 2,000 years ago, but also my own and, especially, those of my children.

But let's start with St. Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, and St. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. In 2012, on their June 29 feast day, Pope Benedict XVI said that these two unlikely friends “represent the whole Gospel of Christ.” He noted that “whereas the first biblical pair of brothers demonstrate the effects of sin, as Cain kills Abel, yet Peter and Paul, much as they differ from one another ... illustrate a new way of being brothers, lived according to the Gospel, an authentic way made possible by the grace of Christ's Gospel working within them. Only by following Jesus does one arrive at this new brotherhood.”

Pope Francis, on their feast day last year, very much echoed his predecessor, saying that “at the heart of their story is not their own gifts and abilities; at the center is the encounter with Christ that changed their lives. They experienced a love that healed them and set them free. They then became apostles and ministers of freedom for others.”

This shared feast of these two great apostles and saints provides us with an opportunity not only to celebrate their legacy as it relates to the history of Christendom, but also the model of friendship that they continue to provide in a world that sorely needs such a witness to fraternal love.

Recent studies have shown that Americans today are suffering

from a drastic lack of friendship as compared to their peers from a generation ago. The Survey Center on American Life reports that 12% of Americans today say they have no close friends – a steep rise from the 3% who said the same 30 years ago. A comparison of the same surveys showed that 33% of Americans in 1990 claimed to have 10 or more close friends, while today that number is just 13%. And, last, in 1990, 75% of Americans claimed to have someone whom they considered to be a “best friend,” while today that applies to just 59% of U.S. adults.

If the decline in deep and meaningful friendships among today’s adults is worrisome, even more so is that of friendships among young people. In-person social interactions among teens have largely been replaced by digital connections – mostly through texting and social media. According to the the most recent study on the subject by the Pew Research Center – a 2018 survey that, even now, is likely out of date – 60% of teens say that they interact with friends online “every day or almost every day,” while less than a quarter say that they do the same in person.

Other studies have shown that more kids today feel lonely, depressed, “left out” and less confident in social situations than the generations of teenagers before them.

I’ve seen these statistics play out in my own home, where, often, my kids would much rather spend time on their phone watching YouTube, or SnapChatting with their friends, than they would making an effort to get together in person. I’m sure I’m not alone when I say that I’m concerned by how this lack of in-personal social interaction will affect them in both the short and long terms.

Pope Francis wrote about the importance of friendships in *Fratelli Tutti*, his 2020 encyclical on fraternity and social friendship. He wrote: “Our relationships, if healthy and authentic, open us to others who expand and enrich us.

Nowadays, our noblest social instincts can easily be thwarted by self-centered chats that give the impression of being in deep relationships. On the contrary, authentic and mature love and true friendship can only take root in hearts open to growth through relationships with others. As couples or friends, we find that our hearts expand as we step out of ourselves and embrace others. Closed groups and self-absorbed couples that define themselves in opposition to others tend to be expressions of selfishness and mere self-preservation” (No. 89).

Let us pray to Sts. Peter and Paul, that all generations – young and old – embrace the human desire for authentic friendships that fill our lives with joy and purpose.

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