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A FRIENDSHIP LIKE NO OTHER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

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“Friendship is the source of the greatest pleasures, and without friends even the most agreeable pursuits become tedious.”

—THOMAS AQUINAS

6. God is present at every moment. We can discern the movements inspired by God in every experience. How much have you reflected on the fact that God is present in every experience? How does this help you understand your relationship with God and others? (p. 179)

7. God’s Spirit and the evil spirit operate differently with those who have turned away from God. For those who act contrary to what is right, the evil spirit tries to douse the conscience pangs that come from God’s Spirit raising questions about our behavior. Fr. Barry experienced this when dealing with his alcohol consumption. What do you think of his example? What does it tell us about how the Spirit works in our lives? (p. 182–183)

8. For those who live honest and upright lives, the bad spirit raises doubts that cause inner turmoil; the good spirit encourages us and increases our peace, joy, faith, hope, and love. How can you recognize and follow where God’s Spirit is leading you? (p. 183–184)

9. Consolation refers to “every increase in hope, faith, and charity, and every interior joy which calls and attracts one toward heavenly things and to the salvation of one’s soul, by bringing it tranquility and peace in its Creator and Lord” (*Sp. Ex.*, n. 316). When have you had experiences of God’s “consolation”? What have they meant to you? (p. 186–187)

10. Provided that we are trying to live as friends of God, experiences of feeling out of sorts, ill at ease, anxious, unhappy, listless, etc., are experiences of desolation. They do not come from God. Ignatius also advised never to make a decision when in “desolation.” Why do you think that this is an important teaching? (p. 187)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION Ignatius writes of the enemy of human nature using the tactics of a military commander besieging a city. The commander will try to find weak spots in the defense and attack it. What are some of the weak spots in your “city”? Are you prone to self-doubt every time you feel close to God? Do you doubt that God wants your friendship? Think on these things yourself, and also seek out a spiritual director who can help you discern with more confidence when you are in tune with God.

SESSION 5: CHAPTERS 13–14

OPENING SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

Isaiah 11: 8–9

The baby shall play by the cobra's den,
and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair.
There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord,
as water covers the sea.

DISCUSSION

1. Jesus of Nazareth is now *the* place where heaven and earth meet. He is “holy ground.” How aware are you that when meeting Jesus you are on “holy ground”? (p. 162)
2. “Thin places” are where the border between heaven and earth seems especially porous and God is believed to leak through more easily. What would you say are the “thin places” in your life? (pp. 162–163)
3. Frequently, we don't let the Scriptures give God a chance to be heard and met. Think of a time when a passage from Scripture has caused you to pause and reflect on God's presence. How did this experience change your relationship with God and others? (p. 167)
4. The Eucharist is the gathering that most often is experienced as “holy ground.” Even everyday Eucharistic liturgies can give a sense of peace and communion. Think of a time when a Eucharistic celebration touched your life in a special way. How did this influence the way you saw your relationship with God and others? (p. 168)
5. Fr. Barry's sister Mary, a sister of Mercy, told of a time when she contemplated seaweed. She began to see lovely colors in the ugly mess. She was reminded of how often she found grace and loveliness in the troubled boys with whom she worked. Reflect on the “thin places” you have experienced that were occasions of sorrow and loss. How have these experiences deepened your sense of the presence of God in your life? (p. 172)

A FRIENDSHIP LIKE NO OTHER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

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WELCOME!

I am delighted that you are gathering to talk about your reactions to *A Friendship Like No Other*. Nothing gives me more happiness than knowing that what I write about God is taken seriously by people who are drawn to God like I am. There are not many places where we can easily talk about prayer with other Christians. It's such an intimate subject, and many of us feel that we have nothing of value to say about it. All of us are attracted to God, however, because God is attracted to us. God desires us into existence for union with God, for friendship, as I maintain in the book. And deep down all of us want what God wants.

I find discussions about experiences of friendship with God very energizing and exciting. On the other hand, I am often bored with theoretical discussions about prayer. So I encourage you to take the risk of telling the truth about your reactions and experiences and to listen to one another with reverence. Let's pray that through these discussions we will all come closer to our hearts' desire: a friendship with God, something God wants even more than we do.

Peace,
Bill Barry, SJ

5. Jesus, our friend, wants to share everything with us, even those things that make us angry and resentful of God. When in your life have you been angry or resentful of God? If you have not, what keeps you from being so? (p. 139)

6. The Holy One helps us realize how unholy we are. But we are also offered forgiveness and an opportunity for repentance and conversion. What realizations do you come to in discovering that what we perceive as God's anger is actually God's forgiving love? (p. 146)

7. Imagine the Trinity looking at our world and deciding to send the Son. In this decision, was God looking at the world in anger or in compassion? What does this say about how God wants us to look at the world? (p. 148)

8. Our world, and we with it, exist only because God wants our existence. What does this mean in terms of how precious you are in the eyes of God? (p. 155)

9. Jesus' resurrection and the disciples' rebirth into a forgiving and inclusive community can only be ascribed to the action of God. What are the signs that you are ready to join the disciples in witnessing God's presence in the world? (p. 157)

10. The Spirit is the least mentioned Person of God. How does God as a silent partner speak to God's willingness to trust you to be a sign of his compassionate presence in the world? (p. 158)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION Reflect on the question, Is there any sin you can commit that God cannot or will not forgive? Allow yourself to enter into God's presence. Think of what God has done for all in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Instead of rejection, feel the utter goodness and holiness of the forgiving God. Resist the temptation to run away, for the experience of God's goodness can be overwhelming. Enter into the spirit of sorrow and contrition to which God calls you.

SESSION 1: CHAPTERS 1-3

OPENING SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

John 15: 15-17

I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father. It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you.

DISCUSSION

1. “What does God want in creating us? What God wants is friendship.” What are the first thoughts that come to your mind when you hear that God wants your friendship? How comfortable are you with the idea? What difference would it make in your life to realize that God wanted you as a friend? (p. xiv)
2. In the story about the destruction of the Egyptian army in Exodus 14: 15-31 on p. 10, God laments the destruction of the Egyptians. They are also God’s people. What attitudes do we need to change in order to see all people as God’s people? (p. 10)
3. The author writes “we exist as persons only in relationship.” How does this challenge the notion that only self-made and independent individuals can be persons? If your image is that of a self-made individual, how can you relate to God as one of his creatures? (p. 14)
4. Adam and Eve lost trust in one another once they had disobeyed God. How much energy does it take to hold up a “leaf” before God and others? How much easier would it be to be open and transparent? (p. 17)
5. God and Abraham developed an open and candid relationship with one another. What subject would you like to talk about with God candidly? How would you challenge God to be God? (p. 21)

6. Friendship with God is not only a path to personal salvation; it is also a means to the salvation of the world. We can choose to be who God wants us to be and be part of God’s solution or be part of the problem. In what way do you see yourself as part of the problem? . . . as part of the solution? (p. 107)

7. Accepting God’s offer of friendship means allowing ourselves to be vulnerable as God is vulnerable. How can you prepare yourself to be drawn into the vulnerability of friendship with God’s friends and potential friends? (p. 108)

8. We are God’s friends in the world to the degree we show compassion as God shows compassion. God’s compassion is not limited. Have you ever experienced a feeling of compassion for someone that rather astonished you? Reflect on how God has been compassionate toward you. How can you prepare yourself to act toward all people with the same compassion that God shows toward you? (p. 111)

9. With the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit, we can follow Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). What steps can you take today to follow Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life? (p. 113)

10. Mary was probably about fifteen when the angel came to her with God’s request that she become the mother of Jesus. At this young age, she was able to make this life-giving decision. How do you think Mary can help you become a better friend of God? What can you ask Mary to do to help people become vulnerable to God in the way that she is? (p. 116)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION God’s family business is a collaboration among the friends of God. God’s family business is discipleship. Reflect on the story of creation in Genesis 2. Reflect on how God and human beings work to develop the garden together. Consider how God enters into conversation with them at the end of the day. Think of ways you can be a co-laborer in building the world for God and others.

SESSION 4: CHAPTERS 9–12

OPENING SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

Habakkuk 3: 17–18

For though the fig tree blossom not
nor fruit be on the vines,
Though the yield of the olive fail
and the terraces produce no nourishment,
Though the flocks disappear from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls,
Yet will I rejoice in the Lord
and exult in my saving God.

DISCUSSION

1. St. Teresa of Ávila wrote, “It is the most dreadful thing in the world that God our Creator should suffer so many misdeeds to be committed by His creatures within Himself.” What does it mean to recognize the presence of God not only in the victims of suffering but also in the people who are harming them? (p. 123)
2. St. Teresa of Ávila was thrown from her carriage into some mud. She said to God, “If this is the way you treat your friends, it’s no wonder you have so few.” In times of frustration, are you able to express yourself as honestly as St. Teresa of Ávila did? (p. 127)
3. The book of Job was written to address the question of why bad things happen to good people. God often acts—or doesn’t act—for reasons that only God understands. Does the book of Job’s answer satisfy you? What else would you say to God? (p. 133)
4. When we think of God as the ultimate fixer, we get into trouble explaining natural disasters and human evil. How much easier do you think life would be if God were a “Mr. Fixit”? Do you think it would be a blessing or an intrusion? (p. 134)

YOUR GUIDE

There are five sessions in this guide, each with questions that focus on ideas and stories from chapters in the book. The questions are designed to help stimulate the open sharing of your own ideas, opinions, and stories.

At the beginning of each session there is an Opening Scripture Reflection. These provide examples found throughout Scripture of God’s desire for friendship with us. We acknowledge this in our opening reflection each time we gather.

At the end of each session there is a section entitled For Further Reflection. This section invites you to take time to contemplate and reflect on an important theme or concept taken from the content of the session’s reading before the next gathering.

MEETING FORMAT

You may want to use the format below when your discussion group meets. Adapt it for the needs of your group.

GATHERING

The leader begins the meeting by lighting a candle and praying: “We begin in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. We thank you, God, for bringing us together to deepen our faith by growing in your friendship. May this deepening relationship inspire us as we use our time and talents to further the mission of your Son, Jesus Christ.” The group then reflects on the Scripture passage.

DISCUSSING

In session 1, the leader may first invite participants to introduce themselves and remind all that open, respectful, and nonjudgmental conversation is encouraged. The discussion continues with the questions. In sessions 2 through 5, the leader may open by asking participants to share their reflections and actions since the last gathering.

CLOSING

The leader encourages participants to read the For Further Reflection section and to contemplate the actions they may take to further their relationship with God before the next session. All pray the Lord’s Prayer together, and the candle is extinguished.

SESSION 2: CHAPTERS 4–5

OPENING SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

John 17: 9–10

I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for the ones you have given me, because they are yours, and everything of mine is yours and everything of yours is mine, and I have been glorified in them.

DISCUSSION

1. Using our imagination in a contemplative way can help us grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ. What steps can you take to fall in love with him and follow him? (pp. 55–57)
2. Ignatius of Loyola teaches us to use our imagination in a contemplative way in order to know Jesus better. What would you like to say to Jesus in an imaginary conversation? (pp. 57–58)
3. When engaged in an imaginative conversation with Jesus, we have to beware of jumping too quickly into thoughts of Jesus' divinity. How can you relax and let the human Jesus reveal himself to you? How can Jesus help you to live as an image of God? (p. 60)
4. The only way forward in this friendship is to tell Jesus what you really feel and think, and then wait for his response. How does it feel to know that there are "no holds barred" in your conversations with Jesus? (p. 61)
5. We now consider Jesus' passion and death, when he was abandoned and betrayed by his friends and had to face the road to Calvary alone. Reflect on a time in your life when you felt you had no one left to trust but God. How can you relate this to Jesus' experience of abandonment? (p. 65)
6. When we consider Jesus' passion and death, we see that Jesus experiences God's powerfulness to preserve him from the horror of crucifixion. What does this do to our image of God as the defender of our rights, ready to strike down our enemies? (p. 66)
7. Consider whether there is anything worse we could do to God than the crucifixion of Jesus. Did God retaliate? Did this deter God from wanting to embrace us in friendship? (p. 68)
8. Enter imaginatively into one of the stories of the Resurrection. We have done our worst, and God has raised Jesus bodily from the dead. With the women, you are meeting Jesus on the road. What do you want to say to him? What do you want to hear from him? (pp. 68–69)
9. After his resurrection, Jesus enters the upper room. He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Imagine you are there among Jesus' disciples. In what area of your life is it most important that you receive the peace offered by Jesus? (pp. 73–74)
10. The Holy Spirit works to bring about what God wants—a world where human beings are friends of God, friends of one another, and friends of the universe that sustains us. How can you cooperate with the Holy Spirit to welcome all as friends of God, to be friends with one another, and to be friends with the universe that sustains us? (p. 79)
11. Ignatius uses the analogy of human friendship to speak of the relationship with God. It is extraordinary, when you think about it, that God wants our gifts just as much as we want God's gifts. God has created us for such mutuality. "Each shares with the other," Ignatius writes. Reflect on the personal gifts you can share with God. What does it mean to you that God wants your gifts as much as you want God's? (p. 83)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION Ignatius proposes that we see, touch, and sense what God is doing in creation. Try reflecting on the following: (1) Remember all the gifts we have received. (2) Consider how God dwells in everything. (3) Consider how God labors for us in all creation. (4) Consider how all good things and gifts come from God. As you contemplate God in these ways, you will become a contemplative in action, one who finds God in all things.

SESSION 3: CHAPTERS 6–8

OPENING SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

Psalm 8: 4–7, 10

When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers,
The moon and stars that you set in place—
What are humans that you are mindful of them,
mere mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them little less than a god,
crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them rule over the works of your hands,
put all things at their feet:
O Lord, our Lord,
how awesome is your name through all the earth!

DISCUSSION

1. The biggest obstacle to a relationship with God is our belief that the relationship depends on us. What do we gain if we judge for ourselves what God wants? What do we lose? (p. 93)
2. “You do God no favor by thinking stingily or meanly about the person who is the apple of God’s eye—you.” What first steps can you take to accept yourself as “the apple of God’s eye”? (p. 95)
3. As we grow to adulthood, our relationship with our parents can become more like the relationships we have with good friends. What about the adult relationship you have, or had, with your parents can be compared to your relationship with God? (p. 99)
4. As adults, God leads us to greater collaboration with our family business. God’s family business is discipleship. In what way are you called to be a collaborator in God’s family business? (p. 100)
5. How would you compare your willingness to be open with a friend to your willingness to be open with God? (p. 106)

6. Ignatius of Loyola taught that all people have experiences of God’s creative and sustaining love. Reflect on an experience that gave you an enormous sense of well-being. Did you understand this as an experience of God? Did this experience in some way help form the direction of your life? (p. 37)

7. God is willing to be hurt again and again and to forgive again and again. How does this image of God’s forgiveness compare with what you have learned in the past? Why do you think God is willing to take such a risk? (p. 47)

8. Has God given up on the world? How do you immediately react to the possibility that God may have given up on our world? What steps can you do to present the case for the world before God? (Review the pp. 18–21 on Abraham’s relationship with God)

9. Fr. Barry gives an exercise for helping us discern the needs of the world. In the midst of the troubles our world faces, what are some signs of God’s continuing presence and love? (p. 49)

10. In the midst of suffering, Jesus only had words of forgiveness on his mind. In what ways can you ask the Father to help us to love others as Jesus did in the midst of his suffering? (p. 51)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION Recall the last experience you had of God when he seemed friendly and close. Now tell God that you want to get back to that closeness. Ask God to show you any remembered faults getting in the way of friendship now. Let your memories flow, trusting God will show you what you need to know. God’s Holy Spirit will do the work of reminding you of what you need to repent. As you become aware of where you have failed to live up to God’s dream for you or turned away from God’s offer of friendship, speak to God.