

Article

Friendship and Spiritual Learning: Seedbed for Synodality

John William Sullivan Theology & Religious Studies, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool L16 9JD, UK; sullivj@hope.ac.uk

Abstract: In the literature about learning in general and also with regard to faith learning, the experience and practice of friendship has been neglected. In the early years of the church, and at various other times, social networks of Christians preserved and handed on the life of faith without the benefit of formal educational institutions or strong ecclesial structures. This article explores the potential of friendship to contribute to the kind of spiritual learning that underpins synodality. The experience of friendship plays an important role in how people access, interpret, welcome and embrace truth and in their paths towards transformation. Friendship is considered here as a form of peer ministry. There can be no social friendship, along the lines advocated by Pope Francis in *Fratelli tutti*, without the laboratory and engine room of everyday personal friendships. Key features of friendship are related to the implications of synodality and to the conditions that support spiritual learning.

Keywords: synodality; friendship; listening; spiritual learning; adult faith formation; life experience; *sensus fidei*

1. Introduction

Pope Francis's programme for advancing synodality in the life of the church—at the moment very much a work in progress and one with no clear outcome—calls for a new pattern of relationships within the church, with a view to rendering the church more fit to witness to the Gospel in the world. Among other things, the synodal movement seeks to foster a closer engagement with the life experience of the faithful, much greater levels of participation and inclusivity, drawing on the insights and talents of all, and a more egalitarian climate of communication. Thus, synodality implies a reorientation of church life and leadership and it requires a different emphasis in how the church faces the task of communicating faith and promoting spiritual learning. In this article, I draw out some of the ways that synodality has implications for how the church approaches faith formation, then explore the existential benefits of friendship, before more directly proposing how friendship contributes to the kinds of spiritual learning that are in harmony with and conducive to synodality.

2. Synodality and a Learning Church

Synodality is both an old and a new way of being church: walking together as equals, listening to the Holy Spirit and to each other's experience of trying to live Christianly. It is about seeking God's will for the kind of church God wants Christians to form at this current juncture of human history. How can the faithful discern together what they have got right and what is good and therefore should be kept going—and how can they work out what they need to let go of, as being less fruitful or even counter-productive in our context (however valuable it was in the past)?

Along with mercy, synodality has emerged as a salient theme for Pope Francis. This article has as its focus just the last of the six elements within Francis' teaching on synodality, as summarised by Sister Natalie Becquart in her Introduction to the compendium of his speeches and writings between 2013 and 2022 ([Pope Francis 2023](#), pp. xvi–xvii). First, there is an emphasis on the People of God being on a journey. Second, he highlights the



Citation: Sullivan, John William. 2023. Friendship and Spiritual Learning: Seedbed for Synodality. *Religions* 14: 592. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050592>

Academic Editors: Eamonn Conway and Renée Köhler-Ryan

Received: 23 March 2023

Revised: 25 April 2023

Accepted: 28 April 2023

Published: 1 May 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

significance of the theology of baptism. Third, he gives more attention than has been the case hitherto to the *sensus fidei*, the experiential understanding of the faith actually held by the faithful. Fourth, he constantly stresses that synodality requires an openness to the Holy Spirit. Fifth, he recognizes the diversity of charisms available through God's abundant grace, given to serve the mission of the church; to draw upon these charisms calls for a much higher degree of participation, cooperation and acceptance of co-responsibility within the church. Finally, Becquart draws attention to Francis' relational anthropology, which underlies his understanding of a relational church; hence a "culture of encounter" is central to his vision, a term closely associated with dialogue, fraternity, friendship, closeness and communion. While friendship in no way constitutes the whole of such relational anthropology, it does promise to make a vital contribution to its outworking and fertility.

Behind his emphasis on synodality is Pope Francis' belief that ordinary believers are not simply passive recipients of divine truths handed down by superiors, but instead that they are given the grace—through their response to God in faith—to be actively involved in discerning what God wants of them and then putting this into practice, as best they can. This is something much more fundamental and far-reaching than merely adding a degree of consultation; it is a call to be much more actively involved in church life and leadership than has been the norm. While it appears to be a new way of being church, in reality, it more closely reflects practice in the early years of the church. Synodality prompts the church to become a much more participative and co-responsible community. It takes seriously the medieval principle that *what affects everyone must be discussed and approved by everyone* (*quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari et approbari debet*). It seeks to rejuvenate the whole body of believers through a process of

reciprocal listening, exchange and communication, sharing and solidarity, the desire to reach a consensus and common conviction. This requires the willingness to collaborate and to cooperate, to accept and to welcome, to give and to receive. This supposes relationships steeped in respect and charity, humility and poverty. This is the synodal spirit (Luciani 2022, p. 28).

Synodality takes baptism, rather than ordination, as the essential qualification for exercising responsibility within the church. As Pope Francis (2013, #120) says in *Evangelii Gaudium*, "All the baptized, whatever their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization." Thus, synodality is one of the steps Pope Francis hopes will move the church away from clericalism and encourage a healthier ecclesial communicative climate. In his vision, a synodal Church is one "in which decision-making is decentralised, the voice of all is listened to, and a process of discernment rather than a simple 'command and obey' model is used to formulate and then confirm by reception the authenticity of Church teaching" (O'Hanlon 2018, p. 93).

At first sight, synodality and Catholic education seem to have little to do with each other. Synodality might seem to some to be merely a way of managing the church, a pathway to reaching decisions about church matters; while Catholic education is an endeavour often carried out alongside others who are outside of the church, and it is very much concerned with equipping people to engage in the world and to act as a leaven there in the light of the Gospel. If synodality is church-facing, an ad intra activity, Catholic education is world-facing, an ad extra activity. However, synodality is being proposed as a way forward for the church in order that a more healthy internal ecclesial ethos, an ethos that is more inclusive, better at listening and more participatory, can enable and inspire the faithful to offer a more winsome and effective witness to the world.

Synodality is essentially a learning process in three senses. First, although it has ancient roots in the life of the early church (Acts, 9.2;19. 9,23; 22.4; 24, 14, 22; Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission 2018, Section II; International Theological Commission 2018, #11–30), for people today, it is new, unfamiliar, untested, and the subject of much anxiety, both for those who invest great hopes in it and among those who bitterly oppose it. Church members are learning how to engage in the synodal process, working it out as they go along. Second, its underlying intention is to discern God's will, to identify

what kind of church God wants us to develop for our time and place; thus, synodality is a mode of spiritual learning. Third, synodality puts great emphasis on learning from life experience as the main medium of our encounter with God; thus, listening to how people are experiencing the joys and the challenges of trying to live Christianly becomes more salient than has hitherto been the case in approaches to faith formation.

The current emphasis on synodality is an attempt to bring about a cultural change in the church: instead of relying heavily on top-down ways of relating, synodality calls for more egalitarian, bottom-up, inclusive, reciprocal and experiential modes of communication and reciprocal learning. Synodality calls for ways of learning that minimise distinctions between teachers and learners in the Church. It implies an emphasis on learning from the faith experience of peers. Such learning will be inter-generational, collaborative, mutual and dialogical, informal, prayerful and intuitive, rather than strongly conceptual and systematic. This learning is to be ongoing, lifelong and always unfinished, drawing heavily from life experience while also being open to and seeking God's will for personal and ecclesial life.

By reversing the priority often perceived to be at work in ecclesial experience, that of ordination over baptism, and therefore of bishops and clergy over the laity, Pope Francis frequently refers to the "scourge" of clericalism as a major source of dysfunction within the church and as an obstacle to the effective communication of the Gospel. The central role of listening in his teaching on synodality—with all the faithful involved and each having a right to be heard and their experience to be taken seriously—seems to imply a more horizontal form of learning, one that is in stark contrast to the teaching of Pope Pius X at the beginning years of the 20th century.

In his encyclical of 1906 *Vehementer Nos* #8, Pope Pius declared that there are quite distinct levels in the church—the *ecclesia docens*, those ordained as priests and bishops, whose task it is to teach and the *ecclesia discens*, the rest of the faithful, whose job it was to learn and to obey their superiors (Pope Pius X 1906). When assessing any major ecclesial statement, it is important to take into account the nature of the threats that were felt at the time by those charged with speaking on behalf of the church. Several factors contributed to the anti-modernist campaign within the church, one that sought to restore confidence in its central authority and structures. The immediate spur was the passing of stringent anti-clerical legislation in France. More broadly, there existed a still strong sense of loss of church power in Italy caused by the Risorgimento—the 19th-century movement for Italian unification inspired by the realities of the new economic and political forces at work after 1815, the liberal and nationalist ideologies spawned by the French Revolution of 1789, and the ideas of 18th-century Italian reformers. In the late years of the 19th century, there had been the Kulturkampf, a struggle between the Protestant Prussian leaders of the recently unified Germany and the position of the Catholic Church in that country. To these should be added the various swirling intellectual developments (scientific, philosophical and historical) being widely broadcast in the early years of the 20th century. Taken together, these contextual developments seemed to undermine faith in the church and foster an atmosphere of being under siege. It is perhaps not surprising that the church adopted a sharply expressed and overly-defensive form of self-understanding at this time.

However, the recent efforts to revive the practice of synodality, especially during the papacy of Pope Francis, call for a different emphasis and a greater desire to foster ownership, rather than mere compliance among church members. The stress of listening, as at the heart of synodality, with all members of the church listening to one another as well as doing so prayerfully and open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, also suggests the possibility of renewed attention being given to peer ministry, though this has not yet been spelled out by commentators on the synodal process.

The kinds of mutual teaching and reciprocal learning that seem envisaged as pivotal for synodality should surely have implications for Catholic education wherever this takes place and especially for adult faith formation. If Catholic education, as Pope John Paul II ([1990] 1996) confirmed, emerges *ex corde ecclesiae*, from the heart of the church, then

a change in the self-understanding of the church inevitably has consequences for how Catholic education is to be approached. Those consequences still remain to be worked out. My more limited focus here is to propose that one important arena for Catholic education, adult faith formation, now oriented for a synodal church, might well benefit from an appreciation of how the experience of friendship can facilitate spiritual learning.

Over the centuries, the church has adopted multiple approaches to promoting faith learning, as well as supplying and supporting formal educational institutions at every level. For example, scripture, liturgy, sacraments, catechesis, pilgrimage, icons, sacred art, music, spiritual direction, retreats—all these have been treated as sources of spiritual learning (Horsfield 2015; Soukup 2022). More recently, increasing attention is given to new technology and its potential as a resource for, as well as the challenges it poses to, Christian communication and learning (Spadaro 2014; Larchet 2019; Miller 2020; Moyse 2021; Sullivan 2022, pp. 199–230). However, friendship as a source and site of learning—both in secular and sacred matters—has been neglected in the literature about religious education, catechesis and faith formation. For example, in neither of the substantial and authoritative collections of official Catholic teaching, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) and the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004), does friendship receive anything more than minimal attention. Nor is there any mention of friendship in the index of either the 1997 *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy 1997) or the 2020 significantly revised *Directory for Catechesis* (Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization 2020). This neglect, by church leaders and theologians, of such a fundamental feature of human life is strange, not least because in earlier centuries, leading exponents of the Catholic faith attributed a great deal of importance to friendship, for example, Augustine of Hippo, Bernard of Clairvaux, Aelred of Rievaulx and Thomas Aquinas (on how these figures emphasised the value of friendship for the faithful, see, respectively, Ford 2022; Campbell 2022; Aelred of Rievaulx 1977; Burton 2020; Lefler 2014; Schwartz 2007).

Let me end this section by making two points, which will be developed further in the following two sections. First, the importance of informal learning in the life of the church, and second, Pope Francis's desire that the church should foster authentic relationships in society. With regard to the first point, the Czech theologian, Josef Mikulášek, identifies one of the outcomes of the consultations that comprised the diocesan and national stages of preparation for the forthcoming Synod on Synodality (to take place in October 2023 and October 2024) as being "insufficient formation of informal spaces in the Church communities where pastoral visions are formulated in discussion" (Mikulášek 2022, p. 12.n.5). Conversations between friends constitute one of those informal spaces, not only for the development of pastoral visions but also for facilitating the spiritual learning necessary for underpinning such visions. As for the second point, in his 2020 encyclical on fraternity and social friendship, Pope Francis laments the defects of an over-reliance on digital relationships:

Digital media . . . lack the physical gestures, facial expressions, moments of silence, body language and even the smells, the trembling of hands, the blushes and perspiration that speak to us and are a part of human communication. Digital relationships, which do not demand the slow and gradual cultivation of friendships, stable interaction or the building of a consensus that matures over time, have the appearance of sociability. Yet they do not really build community; instead, they tend to disguise and expand the very individualism that finds expression in xenophobia and in contempt for the vulnerable. Digital connectivity is not enough to build bridges. It is not capable of uniting humanity (Pope Francis 2020, #43).

There can be no social friendship, along the lines advocated by Pope Francis in *Fratelli tutti*, without the laboratory and engine room of everyday personal friendships.

3. The Benefits of Friendship

The paths laid down for us by those who exercise pastoral leadership in the church are often expressed in language that can seem formal, objective, abstract and addressed universally—and thus somewhat removed from the concrete and messy specificity of daily experience. However, the formal drawing up of theological principles and guidelines always builds on, one might say, is parasitical of, the informal, the episodic and the random events, experiences and insights of the quotidian and the mundane. Such principles and guidelines seek to learn from, to re-arrange, and to find patterns in the multiplicity of individual actions and subjective experiences. It makes lucid what at ground level was elusive, makes clear what seemed vague, and it establishes a grammar that maps everyday speech.

Relationship is central to our access to, interpretation of, and welcoming and embracing of truth and in our paths towards transformation. Interpersonal relations can either inhibit or enhance the communication of knowledge and the sharing of what we have learned from personal experience. The truth, if it is to come alive in us and make a difference, must be felt as well as analysed. In friendship, we negotiate the tensions between normative expectations and the constraints and limitations of daily life. These tensions surface in personal conscience, as we respond to formal advice from those in positions of authority, and conversations with friends allow us the space and emotional support to wrestle with them. The interaction between prescribed ideals and our personal and idiosyncratic interpretations and responses to these within the particular circumstances of life are often played out in exchanges between friends when we are given sufficient time and a safe space to admit our vulnerability and shortcomings and to think through why we act as we do.

Our engagement with friends offers an opportunity for us to rehearse and thereby clarify for ourselves our values, concerns and perceptions of the world and its needs and to make sense of our experience of church. All of us need a plausibility structure that helps us believe that there truly is something good in us and that we are worthy of God's love. Friends can greatly enhance that plausibility for us; they can also serve as a reinforcement of and motivation for good living—through their example and through their influence on us.

The space of friendship is one that has the potential to provide many benefits. It can help us to avoid, on the one hand, a sense of isolation, and, on the other hand, being swamped by and lost in the crowd. It can support us in steering ourselves between radical individualism, which cuts us off from the needs of others, and finding ourselves swimming and adrift in a sea of conformity. It is a space that builds bridges between the mundane and the mysterious experiences of life. While nurturing and protecting the private aspects of life, friendship supports us in opening ourselves to and then committing ourselves to the communal dimension of life. Friendship can be considered as a form of peer ministry, in that its features include giving and receiving, companionship and mutual dependence, accompaniment and recognition. Friendship involves learning from one another, reciprocal nurturing and affirmation, sharing sorrows and laughter, times for enjoyment, safe opportunities for honesty, self-exposure, forgiveness and acceptance. Friends supply encouragement for our better efforts and consolation for life's setbacks.

Through their mutual questioning of each other, friends also exert an influence on our values and priorities and press us to be accountable for how we live these out. In his extensive treatment of ethics, Aristotle devotes two substantial chapters to an analysis of friendship (Aristotle 1979, pp. 258–311; see also Aristotle 1976, pp. 193–99). He argues that friendships are fundamental to the good life and that they help us grow in virtue. True friendship, for him, is dependent on the virtue of each person and, in turn, contributes to and reinforces that virtue in each. We are attracted by the good in another and our relationship with that person affirms his or her goodness, and this is reciprocated.

Donald Evans (1980, p. 6), in his examination of friendliness, includes confrontation as an important feature, along with confirmation, celebration, devotion, respect and affection.

According to Evans (p. 132), in alerting me to some shortcoming or vice in me, a friend “does not *condemn* me for *having* the vice; she *urges* me to resist it. . . . She calls me to draw upon the life-affirming resources which are within me and around me. She asks me to face my weaknesses as she also sets before me my strengths.” In support of the notion that true friendship includes an element of calling one to account, Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167), in his highly influential work on spiritual friendship, wrote:

It is characteristic of friendship to admonish and to be admonished, and to do the former freely, not harshly, and to receive the latter patiently, not resentfully; so it should be understood that in friendship there is no greater pest than flattery and subservency. . . . A man owes truth to his friend, without which the name of friendship has no value (Aelred of Rievaulx 1977, p. 122).

Such a view is echoed by the 21st-century philosopher, James Mumford, who asks: is friendship about affirmation and non-judgmentalism or challenge and truth-telling? (Mumford 2022). He argues that, if we want the best for our friends, we must also care about truth, because allowing them to live in untruth is not a helpful stance to adopt. He urges: “Give your friend the brutal honesty you think they *need*, the brutal honesty you *owe* them, and you inevitably run the risk of rejection. But in the end only people prepared to lose friends will prove good friends.” Mumford is not advocating harshness, self-righteousness or censoriousness in the face of another’s fallibility and failings; humility, sensitivity and compassion are always valuable elements in human communication. However, he suggests, “Friends challenge and coax; they don’t just help us realize our pre-established goals. They question whether our goals are the right ones in the first place.” Referring friends to a better way of living, a more appropriate decision, perhaps even to God, if done with loving care, is a necessary feature of authentic friendship.

The contemporary theologian Anne-Marie Ellithorpe locates this admonishing aspect of friendship within the wider context of helping to free friends from anything that holds them back from becoming their best selves:

Friends help one another grow in freedom by helping each other live more authentic lives. When friends want the best for one another, they use the knowledge they have of one another to call each other to be their best self and also help each other be their best self. . . . Friends have the potential to help one another work through those things that keep them from being free, including fears, anxieties, insecurities, compulsions, painful memories (Ellithorpe 2022, p. 180).

Friendship is improvised; it is not conducted according to set rules. Although it operates below the radar of public communication, its potential influence is strong; all the more so, partly because of the element of play, relaxation and not straining earnestly all the time, and partly because it mixes the mundane with more serious concerns. Friends help us to link issues that are practical and intimate to us with broader principles and ultimate concerns.

We can only sustain close relationships with a limited number of people. The frequency of contact, the informality and the freedom of ordinary friendships, taken together, offer an arena that feeds our spirits, reinforces our sense of identity, and provides a safe space to share our concerns, our feelings and our ideas, as we know that any disagreement is held within a trusting relationship that values us not for the content of our ideas or the nature of our achievements, but simply for who we are. More than anything else, our friendships cater to our uniqueness; whereas in other social bodies, there is always tension between the different needs and priorities of individuals and the broader purpose of those bodies. Friendship exists to sustain the relationship, not to convey information, to exert power, to serve some social purpose, to enrol or to control others. Thus, loyalty through good times and bad is a crucial ingredient of friendship. In true friendship, even if it is punctuated by moments of quarrels, even serious disagreements, there is a continuation—it endures above and beyond apparently barren periods. Friendship transcends culture, gender and

sometimes even age difference. It is neither calculating nor transactional; thus, it acts as a counterweight to the prevailing technocratic mentality by being gratuitously given.

However, although friendship is a voluntary activity, it cannot be said to be an optional endeavour. It is voluntary in that it has to be freely entered into; if not voluntary, the relationship will be resented by the one who feels compelled to participate. However, it is not optional in that it is necessary for authentic human development and flourishing. The path of friendship is a discipline as well as a joy. Simultaneously affirming another and opening oneself up to another person's horizon and receiving the gift of their uniqueness, it calls for unselfish attitudes and behaviours that are forms of sacrifice. "How will you lay down your life for me, if you will not lend me a needle and thread when I need it? How will you shed blood for me, if you think it beneath you to give me a cup of cold water, if you cannot be bothered to take your hand out of your pocket for me?" (Aelred, quoted by Rosser 2015, p. 101).

Friendship is a context where the mutual bearing on each other of our inner life and our outer life gets articulated, "rehearsed", confirmed and questioned, and brought into some degree of harmony, even if only provisionally. It has long been held that "the potential qualities and full identity of a human individual could only ever be realized through interaction with others" (Rosser 2015, p. 2). This interaction involves mutual subordination to what is perceived as being in the best interests of the other person; here, friendship is neither mastery nor servility. As such, friendships may be viewed as the necessary starting points and building blocks for a wider love, extending further and further to those we know less well.

4. Friendship for Spiritual Learning

Where should friendship as a theological topic be located? It might be located in mystical theology as we develop a friendship with God. It could equally be examined in moral theology as we seek to promote the love of neighbour. It could be considered in systematic theology if friendship is treated as a human analogue for the interaction and reciprocity of Trinitarian relationships. Most obviously, friendship belongs in Christian anthropology, as a constitutive aspect of our social nature and our interdependency. Our identity, sense of meaning and purpose, as well as our understanding of salvation, have to be received from others, as gifts; we cannot bestow these on ourselves, though our receptivity and ownership of them has to be freely accepted and actively taken up by us. In biblical theology, friendship is modelled, tested and commented on. For example, Ecclesiastes speaks of companionship providing safety, mutual support, warmth, guidance, and defence. "Amid a world where all is vanity, the bond of friendship is a source of consolation and joy" (Ellithorpe 2022, p. 85). In the New Testament, friendship is associated with "hospitality, frankness of speech, trust, virtue, good will, reconciliation, equality, oneness of mind, and peace" (Ellithorpe p. 100).

One of the most extensive treatments of friendship and how it feeds into the spiritual life was given by the Cistercian Aelred of Rievaulx, despite the fact that, in his time, there was a fear of particular friendships in monastic communities—that they might cause factions, favouritism, endanger equality and fracture harmony. Some also feared that human affections might deflect people from their love of God. However, for Aelred, there could be no conflict between the love of our friends and the love of God, since all love is one and has its source in God. For him, paraphrasing St John (1 John 4: 16), "He who abides in friendship abides in God and God in him" (Aelred of Rievaulx 1977, p. 24). Aelred waxed lyrical about the benefits of friendship:

What security, what joy to have someone to whom you dare to speak on terms of equality as to another self; one to whom you need have no fear to confess your failings; one to whom you can unblushingly make known what progress you have made in the spiritual life; one to whom you can entrust all the secrets of your heart and before whom you can place all your plans! (Aelred of Rievaulx 1977, p. 72).

He quotes from Ecclesiasticus: “A friend is the medicine of life”; and then from St Paul (Gal 6:2), “shoulder to shoulder, they bear one another’s burdens.” For Aelred, friendship, “heightens the joys of prosperity and mitigates the sorrows of adversity by dividing and sharing them” (Aelred of Rievaulx 1977, p. 72). In fact, far from being an obstacle to a person’s love of God, it serves rather as a stage towards the love and knowledge of God.

This was a view shared by Francis de Sales (1567–1622), who, when bishop of Geneva, taught that laity who seek to live virtuously need the help of good and holy friendships. (De Sales 1966, pp. 169–84). John Henry Newman also valued friendships highly. “The best preparation for loving the world at large, and loving it duly and wisely, is to cultivate an intimate friendship and affection towards those who are immediately about us” (Newman 1868, pp. 52–53). Fostering friendships—apart from contributing to the health and well-being of individuals and reinforcing *koinonia* or communion in the church—is also a contribution to the common good of society generally: promoting greater levels of trust, sympathy, compassion, emotional support and practical aid, facilitating reconciliation and thus helping to prevent conflicts from undermining social harmony.

Conversations with friends form a context for relating religious faith to the overall shape and particular moments in a person’s life. These include maturation, health, aging, mortality; major and minor decisions; touching on matters physical, domestic, social, sexual, familial, educational, political, playful and work-related. If friendships can help us to overcome the gap that often seems to arise between religious and everyday life and language, then its conversations will happily include nappies as well as novenas, holy days as well as holidays, sermons as easily as recipes, politics as well as pilgrimages, troubling teenagers as well as touches of the transcendent. Conversations among friends can cover experiences of family gatherings and liturgical celebrations, the installation of solar panels as well as sacramental initiation, occasions of sickness and encounters with scripture, prayer and parties, fasting and feasting, quarrels and forgiveness. The questions being posed in recent synodal consultative exercises have focussed not only on ecclesial matters but on more existential ones. When this happens, the needs of the body and the needs of the soul are assumed to be intimately connected rather than treated as radically different or as topics to be addressed in entirely different settings.

An acute observation by José Mendonça illustrates the vital necessity of bringing together church teaching and existential concerns:

The real problem for most of us is not doubting that God is the Lord of history; it’s doubting that God is the Lord of *our* history. It is not doubting that God created the world; . . . The thorniest difficulty is to believe with all our strength that the Lord can re-create our interior world, reconfigure our existence (Mendonça 2021, p. 72).

However, friends, who know us intimately—the many minor yet specific and most personal things about us—have an opportunity to help us bridge the gap between a generalised—and rather abstract—faith and one that is really appropriated, internalised and applied to oneself. If synodality is to become effective, one of the tasks of the church is to challenge and encourage friends to help each other to tell the story of their lives within the context of the story of God’s dealings with humanity, the Christian story of salvation (Ellithorpe 2022, p. 101; Shields 1996, p. 116). Sharing stories of what God is doing in our lives or how we see God at work in the world—this is one of the ways we contribute to the extension of God’s universal family of love (otherwise known as God’s Kingdom).

One of the ways that religious teachers and church leaders can support that process of learning how to integrate our personal life experience into salvation history might be to show the People of God that friendship with the friends of Christ from the past can teach us how to be better friends of Christ today. Some historical perspective is necessary here if the voices of the past are to be brought to bear prophetically on the present. As Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt notes:

the traditions carried within the life of the church can subvert the status quo and liberate people from the tyranny of the present. Even—perhaps especially—those traditions that seem initially most unintelligible to our current way of thinking can challenge us to think in new ways, giving the witness of Christians a critical edge against those things that are presumed to go without saying in our culture (Bauerschmidt 2020, p. 109).

Part of the role of schools, universities and the church is to draw upon tradition in multiple ways in order to contribute to the formation of a synodal church. Bauerschmidt recommends the provision of opportunities to study the lives of the saints, “those exemplary friends of God, so varied in time and circumstance yet partaking of the one Spirit, can help us see the diversity of ways in which people have sought to hand on the good news” (Bauerschmidt 2020, p. 110).

Valuable though it is to learn from the friends of Christ in the past, we should not neglect the potential of our ordinary friendships today. As I have indicated in Section 3, friendship yields many benefits that contribute to spiritual learning. Through friendship, we learn self-knowledge, brought about through the affirmation and feedback received from our friends. We experience a heightened enjoyment of life, through moments of shared relaxation and celebration. We enter more deeply into the lives of others, as they allow their fears and hopes and their joys and sorrows to be exposed. Our perceptions about life and society are tested and either validated or modified in the exchange of conversation. Calls are made on our virtues, as we respond to their needs and demands. In some cases, we receive insights into the working of God in our world.

Christians believe that God touches us through other people in mundane, unannounced and unexpected moments of light, healing, joy, love, forgiveness, inspiration and kindness. Although scripture, preaching, liturgy, sacraments, pilgrimages and other religious activities can be channels of grace, the most frequent channels of grace for most people are those creatures made in the image of God, other human beings, in the diverse experience of a range of encounters. As people share some of their life story, and the closer they get to one another, the closer they get to God, as God is always at work in the other person (whether they know it or not, even if they resent God’s presence). In each person, there is some mystery, which means some gift or treasure, one that God wants to draw out and share with the world. Real presence to one another (which entails honesty, humility and down-to-earth self-giving) is an experience that friendship can provide.

5. Friendship as Seedbed for a Synodal Church

So far, in this section, I have referred to three previous commentators on friendship (Aelred of Rievaulx, Francis de Sales and John Henry Newman), the help that friends give us in the task of relating religious faith to everyday life, the importance of learning from the example of friends of Christ in previous centuries, and to the way that friends can function for us as channels of grace. Five further points may be briefly made here about how friendship feeds into capacities and the kinds of spiritual learning needed in forming adults for a synodal church.

First is the essential role of listening. José Tolentino Mendonça highlights the importance of listening in our relationships with others. “Listening . . . above all is an attitude. It bows to the other; it is ready to welcome what is said and what is not said” (Mendonça 2021, p. 104). Furthermore listening “is the most basic form of hospitality” (p. 106). Listening (closely followed by discernment and participation), is perhaps the verb most mentioned in all the recent literature on synodality. Without listening, there can be no real friendship; without authentic listening, synodality cannot function at all. Listening is a prerequisite for spiritual learning. As Mendonça (p. 105) points out, “Spiritual knowledge is not the result of our accumulation of historical and theological information. The wisdom that is most decisive in one’s life comes from listening.”

Second, the particularity of friendship ensures there is concreteness in our expression of charity. Timothy Radcliffe points out that “unless we learn to love particular people

then our love will be cold and empty” (Radcliffe 2023, pp. 6–8). This particularity of love elicits from us associations and resonances of warmth, tenderness and concern that connect directly to this or that person in their uniqueness. It also contributes to the promotion of affective communities. As Thomas O’Loughlin observes, “We can only become the people of God . . . when we live in ‘affective communities’” (O’Loughlin 2023, p. 5). An affective community, where friendly relationships prevail, is a necessary precursor to the church becoming an effective community since, if love does not prevail within the church, the message of love given to the world will lack credibility. Furthermore, without a friendly internal ethos, moves towards synodality will be seriously impeded, for if synodality is to be a characteristic of the church community, “there must be real, human relationships or else this shift to synodality is merely a re-organisation rather than a vision of transformed individuals” (O’Loughlin, p. 15.n38). This emphasis on affectivity—or the quality of warm and caring friendliness—is echoed by the Czech theologian Tomáš Hálík, who argues that “although orthodoxy (right ideas) can be intellectually attractive, without orthopraxy (right action) it is ineffective, and without orthopathy (right feeling) it is cold, callow and shallow” (Hálík 2023).

Third, the sharing of their thoughts and feelings between friends can assist in the process of broadening and deepening a personal understanding of faith so that this becomes integrated into the shared faith of the church. Friendship between Christians can provide a bridge between *sensus fidei fidelis* (the individual person’s sense of the faith) and *sensus fidelium* (the appreciation and understanding of the faith held in common among church members), as friendship is a context where personal sharing enables one to access a wider understanding of what faith means to others. Each of us holds the truths we embrace in our own way. As Newman noted,

Necessary as it is, that we should all hold the same truths (as we would be saved), still each of us holds them in his own way; and differs from his nearest and most loved friends either in the relative importance he gives them, or in the connected view he takes of them, or in his perception of the particular consequences resulting from them (Newman 1979, quoted by Rule 2004, p. 112).

Mutual sharing can gradually contribute to a person’s stronger connection to *consensus fidelium* (what is agreed by all the faithful as the content of the faith). The Hungarian theologian Beata Toth notes a shift that occurred in how the sense of faith had been interpreted. “An emphasis on the concept’s communal, objective dimension dominates until the nineteenth century (the *sensus fidei* is concerned with what the Church as a community unanimously believes, and the subjective process of the interiorisation of such common faith by the individual believer comes into more systematic focus towards the nineteenth century)” (Toth 2023, p. 196). Friendship, through the reciprocal sharing it encourages, has a modest but valuable part to play in moving the faithful away from a more limited and individualised sense of the faith and towards a stronger connection to the *consensus fidelium*—the richer harmony of the whole body of believers conscious of holding something in common that matters to them all.

Fourth, friendship equips us to become bearers of each other’s stories, not only honouring and affirming these, but, through close familiarity with the experiences, perceptions and self-understanding of our friends, we also become capable of representing them to others in and beyond the faith community. Tracey Lamont claimed that “when we hear what is in a young person’s heart and in their mind, ministers become responsible bearers of their story. When we teach through autobiography, they become bearers of *our* story” (Lamont 2023, p. 11). We may extend her comment to include *all* those who hear what is in another person’s heart (of any age). Sharing our very self, which can happen in a professional context but which happens most often among friends, enables our conversation partner to become a bearer of our story and allows us to become a bearer of theirs. This too contributes to the formation of a synodal church that seeks to journey together on the path of faith.

Fifth, friendship has the potential to contribute in important ways to the quality of a group's deliberations as well as to the atmosphere in which these deliberations are carried out; both of these benefits are important for synodality. In an insightful article on developing group-deliberative virtues (Aikin and Clanton 2010), the authors persuasively demonstrate how friendliness, along with its correlated virtues of empathy and charity (a willingness to enter into the perspectives and motivations of others and to take their views seriously), when buttressed by temperance, courage, sincerity and humility, help move members of a group beyond mere congeniality (happily getting on well with others) to collegiality, where they all subscribe to a common goal and set of values. These virtues are valuable not only because they are truth-conducive but also because they foster genuine cooperation and warm feelings among group members and thus enable them to become more open with one another, more willing to receive views quite different from their own, and less likely to be deflected by strong emotions when customary practices are called into question in the synodal process. "Friendliness builds communities of inquiry so that those involved not only feel comfortable contributing at a certain time, but they are *motivated to continue* contributing in good spirit over time" (Aikin and Clanton 2010, p. 415). Such friendliness facilitates discernment as to what is the best way forward rather than a spirit of debate that entails winners and losers.

6. Conclusions

The types of learning facilitated by friendship are rarely of the sharply cognitive kind that is concerned with conceptual clarity, based on cogent argument, and aiming for an objective grasp. Learning from friends tends to focus more on the subjective aspects of learning, without which objective knowledge lacks any deep purchase in our inner life. The way we engage with the world is often in a non-conceptual manner, relying on feelings, desires, intuition and informal reasoning. Friends help us to realise—to make more real for ourselves—what we already know at a superficial level. We learn how to appreciate what we have received from church teaching. In conversations between friends, our beliefs and espoused values get tested and wrestled with—not necessarily in an analytical manner—and they are given time and space to become embedded in the messy complexities of life's dilemmas and challenges. In other words, the exchange between friends is one of the contexts in which "*life is the source of new learning*" (Mikulášek 2022, p. 20). Through friends, we enter into the experience of others and thereby come to see our own situation in the light of theirs. We perceive the weight given by others to the beliefs we have either inherited or embraced, we hear their interpretation of what we profess together in church, and we allow ourselves to get a sense of how the faith we hold in common resonates with them. This in turn helps us to expand—even if only slightly—our "take" on what we profess. We learn gratitude and self-esteem as we receive affirmation from them with regard to our gifts and as we come to believe that we matter to them. This helps us to persevere in the truths we assent to with our minds, even when the going is tough and we are tempted to give up the struggle, to live by them. These aspects of the learning prompted by friendships contribute significantly to our inner life, the springs of motivation and our capacity for spiritual development. Furthermore, "friendship enhancement is a vehicle for the renewal of the church" (Shields 1996, p. 105). Anything that nurtures the practice of friendship contributes positively to the world as well as to the church, because "friendship is inherent to human flourishing, integral to truly just communities, central to the nature and mission of the church, and indispensable to an accurate understanding of the Christian life" (Ellithorpe 2022, p. 215). Therefore, in order to form adults for a synodal church, we should make friendship more central to and salient in Christian teaching and life. An affective community has to precede an effective one. What holds Christians together in a fruitful and healthy way—a centrally superimposed unity, relying on a highly stratified authority that tends to separate leaders from the led, at the expense of involvement, participation and inclusion—or the bonds of mutual affection, shared endeavour and practical cooperation and co-responsibility? Friends offer each other hospitality, help, healing, humour and

hope. Through mutual listening, lament, laughter, loyalty and love they release in each other a willingness to be open and vulnerable, to reach out to others beyond their narrow circles. Friendship bestows confidence in the self and others, and it has the power either to galvanise or to reinforce commitments in the direction of right relationship with the self, others, creation and God.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Aelred of Rievaulx. 1977. *Spiritual Friendship*. Translated by Mary Eugenia Laker SSND. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications.
- Aikin, Scott F., and J. Caleb Clanton. 2010. Developing Group-Deliberative Virtues. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 27: 409–24. [CrossRef]
- Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. 2018. *Walking Together on the Way: Learning to be the Church-Local, Regional, Universal*. London: SPCK.
- Aristotle. 1976. *Art of Rhetoric*. Translated by John Henry Freese. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Aristotle. 1979. *Ethics*. Translated by James Alexander Ker Thomson. London: Penguin.
- Bauerschmidt, Frederick Christian. 2020. *The Love That Is God*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Burton, Pierre-André. 2020. *Aelred of Rievaulx*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press.
- Campbell, Jennifer. 2022. *In Search of Friendship*. Farnham: Waverley Abbey College.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 1994. London: Geoffrey Chapman.
- Congregation for the Clergy. 1997. *General Directory for Catechesis*. London: Catholic Truth Society.
- De Sales, Francis. 1966. *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Translated and Edited by John K. Ryan. New York: Image Books.
- Ellithorpe, Anne-Marie. 2022. *Towards Friendship-Shaped Communities*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Evans, Donald. 1980. *Struggle and Fulfillment*. London: Collins.
- Ford, Coleman M. 2022. *A Bond Between Souls: Friendship in the Letters of Augustine*. Bellingham: Lexham Academic.
- Hálik, Tomáš. 2023. The way, the truth and the life. *The Tablet*, February 11.
- Horsfield, Peter. 2015. *From Jesus to the Internet*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- International Theological Commission. 2018. Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html (accessed on 12 February 2023).
- Lamont, Tracey. 2023. From Change to Transformation: Living Synodality in Ministry with Young Adults. *Religions* 14: 314. [CrossRef]
- Larchet, Jean-Claude. 2019. *The New Media Epidemic*. New York: Holy Trinity Publications.
- Lefler, Nathan. 2014. *Theologizing Friendship*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications.
- Luciani, Rafael. 2022. *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Mendonça, José Tolentino. 2021. *The Mysticism of the Present Moment*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Mikulášek, Josef. 2022. Synodality: The Church That Still Listens and Learns. *Theologica* 12: 11–27. [CrossRef]
- Miller, Christopher Peyton. 2020. *Pixillated Practices*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.
- Moyse, Ashley John. 2021. *The Art of Living for a Technological Age*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Mumford, James. 2022. Find Brutal Friends. *Comment*. July 7. Available online: <https://comment.org/find-brutal-friends/> (accessed on 13 March 2023).
- Newman, John Henry. 1868. *Parochial and Plain Sermons*. London: Rivingtons, vol. II.
- Newman, John Henry. 1979. *Letters and Diaries*. Edited by Ian Ker and Thomas Gornall. Oxford: Oxford University Press, vol. II.
- O’Hanlon, Gerry. 2018. *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis*. Dublin: Messenger Publications.
- O’Loughlin, Thomas. 2023. Celebrating Synodality: Synodality as a Fundamental Aspect of Christian Liturgy. *New Blackfriars* 104: 161–78. [CrossRef]
- Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. 2004. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization. 2020. *Directory for Catechesis*. London: Catholic Truth Society.
- Pope Francis. 2013. *Evangelii Gaudium. The Joy of the Gospel*. London: Catholic Truth Society.
- Pope Francis. 2020. *Fratelli Tutti*. London: Catholic Truth Society.
- Pope Francis. 2023. *Walking Together: The Way of Synodality*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Pope John Paul II. 1996. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference. First published 1990.
- Pope Pius X. 1906. *Vehementer Nos*. Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_11021906_vehementer-nos.html (accessed on 25 February 2023).
- Radcliffe, Timothy. 2023. The most beautiful thing on earth. *The Tablet*, February 4.

- Rosser, Gervase. 2015. *The Art of Solidarity in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rule, Philip C. 2004. *Coleridge and Newman*. New York: Fordham University Press, Quoting from John Henry Newman, *Letters & Diaries*, II. p. 60.
- Schwartz, Daniel. 2007. *Aquinas on Friendship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shields, David. 1996. Friendship: Context and Content of Christian Religious Education. *Religious Education* 91: 104–21. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Soukup, Paul A. 2022. *A Media Ecology of Theology*. Waco: Baylor University Press.
- Spadaro, Antonio. 2014. *Cybertheology*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Sullivan, John. 2022. *Lights for the Path*. Dublin: Veritas.
- Toth, Beata. 2023. Knowledge of the Heart: Notes on the Definition of the *Sensus Fidei* in the Personal Life of the Believer. *New Blackfriars* 104: 195–207. [[CrossRef](#)]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.