

## APOSTOLIC FRIENDSHIP



Good afternoon, dear friends—our administrators, distinguished guests, professors, mentors, formators and communities, families and friends, my dear classmates. A parish priest was given feedback by a lay leader that the people were commenting that he was not engaging the people like a friend. In his dismay, he replied: “I was ordained to be your parish priest, not to be your friend!”

This simple anecdote reminds me of something that Fr. James Kroeger told us in our Christology class: if we wish to sum up the ministry of Jesus Christ, it would be that of a ministry of friendship, friendship on many levels. It is in that understanding that I anchor the synthesis of our journey as the graduating batch of 2015; if I were to sum up our experience in the past four years here at LST, it would be under the theme of APOSTOLIC FRIENDSHIP.

It is indeed a special privilege to be speaking before you today as your class valedictorian this year when important milestones are celebrated by our ecclesial community: the culmination of the 50<sup>th</sup>

Anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, the Apostolic Visit of Pope Francis in January, and the 50<sup>th</sup>

Anniversary of the establishment of Loyola School of Theology. But, this honor does not solely belong to me; the honor more rightly belongs to our religious Institute, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, which just celebrated the Philippine Province’s 75<sup>th</sup>

Anniversay last year and is celebrating the 200<sup>th</sup>

Anniversary of the Congregation next year. To my Our Lady of the Assumption Scholasticate

formators and brothers, allow me to offer this honor as the tribute of our community to the congregation. To the LST Administration, thank you for giving us this honor and privilege (the first in LST and in our Province's history).

Allow me to share with you today my reflections on the theme of "Apostolic Friendship" that is inspired by and is filled with the most significant learnings and memories of our class.

Apostolic Friendship is the character that seals the bond of our relationship as a batch and that marks one of the most essential theological-pastoral learnings we gained at LST. Its wisdom is one of the most important gifts that we will bring with us as we commence our apostolic ministries after graduation amidst all the challenges of the mission of evangelization today.

The words of Fr. Kroeger summing up the ministry of Jesus Christ as that of ministry of friendship have remained in my heart since our second year Christology class. I have frequently pondered those words in my heart and have made that understanding a part of my personal and pastoral life. Indeed, Jesus Christ's primary mode of interaction in his ministry was that of friendship. Friendship is a characteristic theme of Jesus, because to be a friend to someone is a form of love, of which he is personally the embodiment. Jesus's friendship with his disciples and with those he chose to relate (the marginalized, the outcasts, the sick, children and women) reveals to us his person and mission—that he is sent by his Father so that they, we also, may no longer be called slaves, but friends of God.

Jesus brought us into an intimate relationship with God as his friends; and, it is that same friendship which Jesus commissioned his disciples, to whom we are successors, to bring to all peoples. We are perpetuating that friendship of Christ, of God, through our mission as a Church, a mission that is characteristic of the ideal of Apostolic Friendship.

In our journey together here at the Loyola School of Theology, our academic learning and relationship with one another taught me what Apostolic Friendship means with its integral elements, which I would like to express in 4 "G"s: Giftedness, Gratefulness, Generosity, and Godliness.

Firstly, Apostolic Friendship consists in real friends who recognize and rejoice over the **giftedness**

of each other. In Apostolic Friendship, none of the friends is better nor is there anyone lesser. All of us are gifted, endowed with unique gifts proper to each for the building up of Christ's Body as willed by God. I am fortunate to belong to a class, such as ours, who knows how to appreciate and affirm the gifts of one another. No one possesses all gifts, and it is for that reason that we have learned and lived out the value of interdependence, overcoming envy, jealousy, and competition, in our pilgrimage together.

Truly, we have been graced with diverse gifts that are intended by God for the building up of his kingdom. But of the many gifts, it is the gift of our very person that is most important because embedded in each of us is the friendship of God; it is the gift of our personhood, the locus of Christ's friendship, which marks the heart of Apostolic Friendship.

Our recognition of our giftedness essentially leads us to the second element of Apostolic Friendship: **gratefulness**. True friendship is grateful; thankfulness is always requisite in Apostolic Friendship. Our recognition and celebration of our gifts go beyond what is received; truly, gratefulness is a solemn recognition and celebration of the Giver of the gifts.

Apostolic Friendship honors God who gives us, first of all, the singular grace (*charis*), that is, Jesus Christ who brought us into friendship with God, and second of all, the manifold graces (*charismata*) that make us capable of relating in friendship with God and with one another. Furthermore, Apostolic Friendship honors those people with whom our gifts are shared, developed, appreciated, and realized. God sends us people as his instruments in expressing, nourishing, enjoying, and actualizing our gifts; to those people, we express our heartfelt and sincerest gratitude.

Our gratitude for our giftedness, however, ought not to be mere gratefulness expressed in words of recognition and praise; the true expression of gratitude, and this is the third element of Apostolic Friendship, is **generosity**. The recognition of our giftedness in the altitude of the *head* moves us to gratefulness in the depths of the *heart*, which brings us further to actualization in the *hand* extended in generous action.

God is totally generous! God, even in his bestowal of gifts on us, wills to make us likewise generous. We are blessed with gifts so that we may also have gifts to share, allowing us to live out our lives as images of a generous God. It is upon that grace of divine generosity that our Apostolic Friendship is founded and also directed toward. Our mission is constituted in the generosity of concretizing that friendship of God through service, which is patterned after Jesus's perfect example of true friendship, that is, in selfless service.

Our apostolic sojourn during this particular stage in our formation is filled with diverse experiences of God's friendship, particularly through the many people who showed us that friendship is characteristic of service. Many times we fail to recognize that the people who render us service in our schools, communities, and ministries are Jesus's manifestations of his own friendship; please, let us not forget to thank them for personifying Christ to us.

The giftedness, gratefulness, and generosity characteristic of Apostolic Friendship equip us to go out of ourselves and indeed be in deep friendship with God—that friendship with God from and for which we are called and sent to bring it to all peoples. Personal relationship with God, that is **Godliness**, is the fourth element of Apostolic Friendship.

Our personal friendship with Christ is the source, core, and summit of Apostolic Friendship; it is the friendship of Christ that brought us together as his disciples; it is the friendship of Christ that we shared with one another as apostolic friends; it is the friendship of Christ that we proclaim in our evangelization; and, it is to that friendship of Christ that we desire to bring all peoples through our Apostolic Friendship with them. Our personal friendship with Jesus Christ ought to be the heart of our apostolic life. It is our friendship with him that will animate all our missionary impulses and endeavors.

To conclude, I wish to finally honor our four Filipino Oblate Martyrs: Bishop Ben de Jesus, Fr. Nelson Javellana, Fr. Benjie Innocencio, and Fr. Rey Rhoda. Imbued with the spirit of Vatican II, all four of them (three of whom graduated from Loyola School of Theology) were exemplars of Apostolic Friendship as they shared "the joys and hopes, the griefs and anguishes, ... especially of the poor and afflicted" (GS 1) people of Mindanao and Jolo-Sulu. Their martyrdom witnesses to the perfect character of Apostolic Friendship, which is to fully love all whom Jesus Christ wills to share his friendship with, even to the point of death. Indeed, the willingness to sacrifice one's life for a friend is constitutive of Apostolic Friendship; as Jesus says in John's Gospel: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13). Inspiringly, our four Oblate martyrs embodied the friendship of Christ without cultural and religious boundaries as they dedicated their lives in friendship with our Muslim and *lumad* brethren. To our Muslim and *lumad* brothers and sisters they gratefully

shared their gift of Christ's friendship and generously offered their lives so that they, too, may experience the friendship of God.

Friends, we may not be called to martyrdom by blood as did our four Oblate martyrs; but we are called to the ordinary and daily martyrdom of going out of ourselves. Thus, it is the very friendship of God, of Jesus Christ, that penetrates our very persons, that animates our lives, and that constitutes our service to the Church, especially to the poorest and those most abandoned, including peoples of other faiths, cultures, and traditions.

It astonishes me to realize that the beginning of my religious formation in Cotabato was marked by the tragedy of the Maguindanao massacre and now it concludes with yet another fiasco—the Mamasapano tragedy. But, what is more astounding to me is that despite these events that bring forth huge challenges to mission and evangelization in Mindanao, our Lord God has not allowed my zeal for missionary life to be diluted or lost.

Permit me a personal word to my Dad: "You are right when you told me seven years ago that to live my life in service of the people of Cotabato, Maguindanao, Sultan Kudarat, Sulu, and Tawi-tawi as a religious missionary priest, is the noblest act that I will ever do in my life." To my biological mother who is now in heaven: "Thank you for entrusting me, through our Immaculate Mother Mary's care in heaven, as our family's oblation to God who called me to share the gift of Apostolic Friendship with the Church and the world."

Indeed, to live out a life of Apostolic Friendship (wherever we may go after our graduation today) is the noblest thing that we can ever do in our lifetime. It is the friendship of Jesus Christ that we are called to witness to, so that the joy of the Gospel may shine forth in the world. As Pope Francis puts it: "If something should rightly disturb us it is the fact that many of our brothers and sisters are living without the friendship of Jesus Christ" (EG 49).

We here are very blessed because we have all been consciously experiencing the friendship of Jesus Christ through one another. It is now time to go forth and share with the world the joy of the Gospel—the joy of Christ's friendship—in the fullness of our giftedness, gratefulness, generosity, and Godliness in the spirit of Apostolic Friendship.

Sincere thanks to everyone for sharing this happy occasion with our graduating class of

2015. Praised be Jesus Christ and Mary Immaculate!