



Finding Faith

Sts. Gertrude and Matilda

~Michele~

Faith is the theological virtue by which we believe in God and all that he has said and revealed to us, and that Holy Church proposes for our belief, because he is truth itself. By faith “man freely commits his entire self to God.” For this reason the believer seeks to know and do God’s will.

—*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1814*

Going away to college seven hours from home, I didn’t know a single person. It was time for me to make a fresh start with my life and make new friends. I quickly made friends with several other girls in my dorm who had attributes I really cared about at the time; they were pretty and popular. We started classes and began hanging out for breakfast, lunch, and dinner as well as the evenings and weekends. We bonded over late nights

of celebrating, cramming for exams, watching useless television in our dorm rooms, working out, and playing intramural sports together. While virtues weren't the criteria for selecting my new friends, God had a bigger plan in mind. Most of these girls and I were still fledglings in our faith. We knew from our parents (and the gifts bestowed upon us at our Confirmation) the truth of our Catholic faith, but we hadn't fully embraced the lifestyle. Thankfully, my parents and their parents had the gift of a strong faith. They had intentionally sent us to a university where that gift would be set alive and nurtured.

In this unique environment, we all began to grow. One by one, we each had a spiritual awakening and discovered a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Collectively, we made our faith the priority in our lives. Perhaps the most significant development in our early college careers was our decision to join the household system. These groups of men and women were small, Christ-centered, Spirit-led communities. The goal of these "Catholic sororities" was to help each student develop deep friendships with other students and to grow in body, mind, and spirit by supporting one another and holding one another accountable during their conversion process.¹ Providentially, my household included Emily and was named after the Blessed Mother, Mary: "Mother of Love."

Our household met each week to break bread together on Saturday during small prayer services we held in common areas of the dorms. There, we learned to pray with our friends. This was the first time some of us had ever prayed aloud with anyone besides our family members. We went to Mass together, played sports together, were roommates, and grew to be almost as close as sisters. Our friendships and our faith continued

to deepen over the years. As we grew, we noticed that these friendships were different than others that we had experienced in the past because they were deeply rooted in our faith: our belief in God and the teachings of the Church. Through our faith-filled friendships, we encouraged each other to seek out the will of God for our lives and held each other accountable for our actions.

Four short years after we met, this group of sisters in Christ graduated from college and moved all over the country. Although miles separated us, our friendships remained strong. We stayed in touch through an e-mail group I initiated shortly after graduation and had many reasons to reunite. We were bridesmaids in one another's weddings, became godparents to one another's children, and continued to visit and call each other often. As our families grew, we visited one another and vacationed together. Over the years, our children have come to know one another and have continued our friendships into the next generation.

When there were no more weddings to attend, we started getting together every few years for a just girls' reunion to reconnect and catch up. One of the highlights of the reunion weekends was going to Mass together. We would all sit together in one long pew, just as we had in college. During our most recent get-together, I looked down the pew and thanked God that each of us had taken that tiny seed of faith that was planted in us and allowed it to blossom. We have all matured into women of faith, making our faith a priority in our lives, and our friendships are stronger than ever. Now we are active parish or Catholic community members spanning from Ohio; Texas; Georgia; New York; Vermont; Illinois; Washington, DC; Iowa; to Canada. The virtue of faith has given us such a strong bond that distance

cannot separate us from one another. Though we live in a world that no longer embraces Judeo-Christian values, I appreciate these friendships of faith. I am blessed to know that I can always call upon these women for support in times of need and encouragement in living out our Catholic beliefs.

While my college relationships were the first strong friendships I had with women who exemplified the virtue of faith, they were certainly not the last. Although I was in a unique environment in college before, I realized I could also have a strong community of faith-filled friends in my life now by belonging to a small faith-sharing group. When I was first invited to my friend Chrissy's home for a women's Bible study, I didn't feel like I was "in the market" for any new friends. I was satisfied with my current friendships, busy with my job, and happily married. In hindsight, I see that this was one of the best things that could have ever happened to me, as it was a beautiful opportunity to make new friends in faith. After college, as I desired to grow stronger in my own faith, I realized it was essential for me to seek out women who felt the same. In this way, we became a support system for each other in a world that does not embrace a Christian lifestyle.

The first night of the study, seven of us, including Emily, sat around Chrissy's kitchen table, and we began studying the scriptures. We met twice a month during that study, and each week a new friend joined us. After we finished that study, we progressed to another in the series, and our group continued to grow. This went on for years! Since many of us had young children then, we also met in each other's homes for "Rosary playdates," where we'd let the kids play and enjoy each other's company before gathering to pray the Rosary. We added a Christmas party to include our spouses and, later, a

family picnic in the fall. We instituted a group e-mail that provided a way for us to communicate meeting times and served as a prayer chain list. It also was a safe place for us to ask questions about our faith and parenting, share great articles on the faith, and suggest other faith-building opportunities and events. Even though we lived in different parts of the city and belonged to different parishes, the common bond built by a search for truth and a deeper relationship with God kept us cemented together.

Our group continued to grow as we met new women who longed for companionship and the support of a small community. To this day, we come together to celebrate good times: new babies, Baptisms, First Communions, graduations, and new jobs. We offer support for each other in hard times too: the loss of parents, troubled marriages, job losses, serious illnesses, miscarriages, and once, even the heartbreaking sudden death of a newborn. Over the years, we've performed works of mercy together, reaching out to others outside of our group, such as hosting a baby shower for a woman in a crisis pregnancy, running a vacation Bible school for underprivileged kids, collecting Easter baskets and Christmas gifts for homeless children, and hosting food drives for a local food pantry.

Our mutual support continues to be both physical and spiritual. We create care calendars for new babies or those who are going through a difficult time. Most importantly, with one quick e-mail, these forty women are immediately praying for a pressing need or intention. While we don't live together as I did with my household sisters in college, the community of friendship we have created is very similar in its spiritual underpinnings and the faith that bonds us to one another. Many of these women are my closest friends,

including Emily, who is my former household sister, my longtime Bible study companion, and now my partner in ministry!

The Virtue of Faith

Faith is believing in God and giving him our yes to his will in our lives. Faith is not only believing in God but also experiencing him and seeing the world through his eyes.² St. Paul writes in the letter to the Hebrews, “Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen” (11:1). The virtue of faith is one of the three theological virtues—the other two are hope and love—and is a gift “infused by God into the souls of the faithful” (CCC, 1813) at our Baptism. They are theological because they “relate directly to God. They dispose Christians to live in a relationship with the Holy Trinity. They have the One and Triune God for their origin, motive, and object” (CCC, 1812). Having faith changes everything. When we have faith, we place God first in our lives. Having faith is the foundation of all the elements in Christianity; it is the bedrock of our hope, our love, all the virtues, and even our prayer.³

By practicing the gift of our faith, especially through the reception of the sacraments, we can open up this gift and allow it to spread into our lives and all of our relationships. Being open to faith is the first step in building spiritual friendships. We need faith to allow Christ to work in our lives. We read in the gospels that Jesus could not perform miracles in Nazareth because of their lack of faith. However, in many other instances, Jesus was able to heal illness, raise people from the dead, and even forgive their sins because of their great faith. “Your faith has saved you; go in peace,” he told the sinful woman who washed his feet with her own hair in the Gospel of Luke (7:50).

Holy friendships are key to growing in the virtue of faith. Without the right support system and faith-filled friendships, living your faith is more difficult. St. Teresa of Avila writes that spiritual friendship is so extremely important that: “I don’t know how to urge it enough. It is necessary for those who serve Him to become shields for one another that they might advance.”⁴

Our journey as Christians is not one we are meant to travel alone. Jesus himself had many friends while he was on earth, and as he sent out his disciples to spread the Good News, he sent them out “two by two” (Mk 6:7). In the book of Ecclesiastes we are reminded, “Two are better than one. . . . If the one falls, the other will help the fallen one” (Eccl 4:9–10). When I have been weakened by sin, my friends have been there to pull me up and help me continue on in faith. My friends of faith are the people in my life who encourage me to take the higher road and, by their example, help me grow closer to God. After encountering these women, I am always inspired to live out my faith more fully. Their influence may be through praying with me over a cup of coffee or sharing a blog post on how to raise children in the faith. It may be an invitation to meet them at Mass or to attend an event featuring an inspirational Catholic speaker. It can even be as simple as a text message with a scripture verse, encouraging me to stay strong and reminding me that God loves me. These friendships are a gift to me and help me in my daily walk as a daughter of God.

The goal of spiritual friendships is to encourage each other on the journey, grow in holiness, and do God’s will in our lives. By doing so, we can know, love, and serve God in this lifetime and, ultimately, live by the words of St. Padre Pio: “Let us become saints so that after having been together on earth, we may be

together in Heaven.”⁵ In this way, our friendships will last forever! When two people have the common bond of friendship in God, not only can a strong relationship develop but also their love of God can change the world.

Friendship of the Saints: Matilda and Gertrude

Throughout history we have seen that many of these holy men and women had friends who helped them in their journeys toward heaven. Through these spiritual friendships, both people not only grew in their faith but bore such a witness that they are now publicly recognized by the Catholic Church for their heroic virtue. Some of these friendships were so strong that they have even been depicted in Catholic artwork. A few months ago, a friend sent me a text message with a picture of two saints standing beneath Jesus with his Sacred Heart exposed. The caption beneath the picture read, “St. Matilda instructing the novice, St. Gertrude.” I was familiar with St. Gertrude the Great’s powerful prayer to release holy souls in purgatory, but who was this other saint in the picture? I did some research and found the story of two beautiful women and how the faith of St. Matilda, also known as St. Mechtilde, was shared in their friendship. This grace helped St. Gertrude to become truly great in the eyes of the Lord.

St. Matilda was born in 1241 in Saxony (now Germany). She joined the Benedictine order at a young age and had many gifts that made her an attractive, holy person. She was bright and talented. A gifted singer, she was given the duty of directing the choir. She had a very sweet disposition with a personality so kind and genuine that everyone wanted to be around her. Pope Benedict XVI spoke about Matilda in an audience in

2010, stating she was “distinguished by her humility, her fervor, her friendliness.”⁶ It was noted that no one left her company without being consoled and strengthened. Matilda was like a mother to all she met, and she was a gifted teacher as well. When she spoke about the Word of God, students would gather around her as if she were a preacher. She was placed in charge of the school at the monastery, and it was in this capacity that she first met St. Gertrude.

According to the common practice of that time, Gertrude came to be a student at the monastery at the age of five. She was put in the care of Matilda, who was then twenty years old. Gertrude became a disciple of Matilda, but as Gertrude matured, their relationship deepened and they became confidantes and close friends. Gertrude, like her mentor friend, was a strong student and possessed many spiritual gifts. Most importantly, Matilda taught Gertrude the faith and helped Gertrude understand the spiritual gifts they both had been given. Gertrude had a deep conversion of heart at about the age of twenty and went from a life that focused on studies to one of deep, mystical prayer. Gertrude knew the gift of her faith was due to her friendship with Matilda and wrote in her memoirs to Jesus, “I would have behaved like a pagan . . . in spite of desiring you since childhood, that is since my fifth year of age, when I went to live in the Benedictine shrine of religion to be educated among your most devout friends,”⁷ a time which included the influence and friendship of Matilda. Matilda, who was also a mystic, had a unique influence on Gertrude because of their friendship, and she helped Gertrude navigate her faith journey as the young woman grew closer to Jesus, showing her that the gifts she was given were from God. With Matilda by her side, Gertrude’s mysticism deepened and she

received the spiritual or invisible stigmata. While Gertrude had no physical evidence of the wounds of Christ in her hands and feet, she felt the pain interiorly.

With both of their eyes fixed on the Lord, the friendship of the two saints deepened and strengthened over the years. When Matilda was about fifty years old, she went through a very serious spiritual crisis and physical illness.⁸ She confided to Gertrude and another friend all the special gifts God had given her. They kept notes of these special graces, and the notes were later published as *The Book of Special Grace* (also called *The Revelations of St. Matilda*). Later, the two saints coauthored a book, *Prayers of St. Gertrude and St. Mechtilde of the Order of St. Benedict*, which can still be purchased today.

Matilda died of natural causes on November 19, 1298, at Helfta monastery, yet her friendship with Gertrude continued even after Matilda departed from earth. After her death, Matilda appeared to Gertrude and told her that *The Book of Special Grace* was her greatest joy and that it would bring much glory to God and good to those who read it. Gertrude lived only four more years, but even in that short time, her example of a holy life inspired many. She wrote *The Herald of Divine Love* as well as her *Spiritual Exercises*, which have been called “a rare jewel of mystical spiritual literature.”⁹ The writings of these women have been described as “incomparable treasures” on the doctrine of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Gertrude is the only woman among the saints to be called “the Great.”

The friendship of Gertrude and Matilda is an example of how the faith of both women was deepened throughout their lives because of their relationship. Their positive influence on each other encouraged both of them to draw closer to God and to know his will in their lives. Both of these saints’ lives were changed

forever by their friendship, which continues today in heaven. Their faith inspires many women today as the story of their holiness continues to be shared throughout the ages; their friendship is an illustration of how our friendships of faith can help us become saints too.

Obstacles to Faith

Living a life of faith is not always easy. Skepticism, doubt, secularism, and hard teachings of the Church can cause our faith to be shaken. Living out faith is also different than just accepting our beliefs. It requires us to act according to our belief systems, rooted in love, and to bear fruit. We can believe in God and the teachings of the Church, but unless this belief changes our lives, our faith is dead. A person of faith resembles Christ. Pope Francis reminds us that “Being Christian is not just obeying orders but means being in Christ, thinking like him, acting like him, loving like him; it means letting him take possession of our life and change it, transform it and free it from the darkness of evil and sin.”¹⁰ A life of faith is not an easy ride, and therefore it requires perseverance through suffering and trials. In persevering, we remember the words of St. Paul to the Corinthians to “stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be strong” (1 Cor 16:13).

In addition to the ordinary difficulties of living a life of faith, we can also reject this gift or lose it through sin. Although I had these faith-filled friendships, there were times in my life that my selfish desires were more important than God’s will and my friends’ encouragement. At times, I fell into sinful patterns that were hard to break. At those times, I knew my choices were sinful, but I didn’t have faith strong enough to walk down the narrow path and I continued to fall. Through the gift of Confession and the blessing of faith-filled friendships,

I was able to work through my struggles. I found the support system I needed to become the daughter of God he was calling me to be. Our heavenly Father wants us all to come to him for this healing and, if we ask him for this grace, he will provide for us the opportunities to develop the gift of increased faith. We need these special graces to persevere! We cannot do it on our own. If you struggle with this virtue, recall these promises of Jesus in Matthew 7:7–11:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread, or a snake when he asks for a fish? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him.

If we ask, God will also bless us with faith-filled friends in our lives. So many friends have shared with me, as they were beginning to grow in their faith, that they asked God to send new friends into their lives who were also his friends. They were shocked at the new friendships that they soon encountered. God wants to give us this gift so we may grow, with our friends, in our faith and come to deeply know him, love him, and serve him. When two people have this common bond of friendship in God, not only can a strong relationship develop but, together, their love of God can change the world.

Friendship in Progress: Developing and Deepening Friendships of Faith

Starting a small faith-sharing group or joining one isn't the only way to grow in the virtue of faith or to build faith-filled friendships. Meeting new friends can be a daunting task, especially if you have never had a relationship that incorporated faith, but in time these friendships will be your most treasured ones. In a day and age when we all have different schedules and family situations, consider some of these options:

1. *Introduce yourself to someone at Mass.* What better place to meet someone who is trying to build the virtue of faith? Invite someone you meet at Mass to coffee or an event to get to know her better. One of the best things that ever happened to me was when a young mom reached out to me after Mass one day and invited me to her home for a playgroup. Her son was just a few months younger than my son, and we ended up meeting every other week. This relationship encouraged me to attend daily Mass more often to meet her there. After Mass, we had an opportunity to talk and spend time together while the boys played.
2. *Attend a Catholic women's conference or retreat.* These day- or weekend-long events offer a time of renewal of faith as well as a chance to connect with old friends, deepen our relationships with acquaintances, or meet new friends. Our conference in Columbus, Ohio, draws women from several surrounding states. Make it a trip with friends (or soon-to-be friends), carpool together, and spend the day being refreshed by Catholic speakers and the sacraments. Afterward, celebrate the day by going to dinner together to discuss what you experienced.

3. *Join a parish-based women's or moms' group.* If your parish doesn't offer one, check out the other parishes in your diocese or consider starting your own. Oftentimes, these groups can offer many different types of opportunities for fellowship, fun, and invitations to grow deeper in your faith. I was recently asked to help form a moms' group for some parishes in our area and have been blessed with many new friendships of faith.
4. *Identify women in your life to meet with to grow and deepen faith friendships.* Many times our friendships do not grow because we do not invest the time we need to get to know the person more deeply. We may feel the initial attraction of friendship, but unless we deliberately spend time strengthening our friendships and getting to know the person more intimately, we end up with many "strong acquaintances" versus true friends. Emily and I designate each Friday as "Friendship Friday" and spend part of that day with one friend we desire to grow in our relationship with or with whom we have lost our connection. When you are open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, he will show you whom to pursue.
5. *Pray for an increase of faith for you and your friends.* St. Matilda and St. Gertrude understood the blessing of friendships. They prayed for each other and even wrote several "prayers for friends" in their prayer book. By praying for faith, we come to see and know God's will in our lives and help our friends do the same. By modeling the lives of the saints who were friends and asking for their intercession before the throne of God, we too can become better friends and grow in holiness.

Pray with us:

Come Holy Spirit, deepen my faith in you.
Come Holy Spirit, show me how to be a friend of faith.
Come Holy Spirit, bring me friendships of faith.
Sts. Gertrude and Matilda, pray for us.