



Social Friendship

Pope Francis is known as a man of dialogue and inclusivity. **Kevin Hargaden**, director of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, introduces the Pope's commitment to social friendship for July's intention



Queen Elizabeth II shaking hands with Northern Ireland Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness, 2014

Pope's Intention (universal): We pray that, in social, economic and political situations of conflict, we may be courageous and passionate architects of dialogue and friendship.

way by our proximity to our neighbours.

Pope Francis encourages us to celebrate such cultural

We all know that Irish society has been deeply influenced by our larger neighbours to the east and the west. This can be seen in many ways – how we commonly follow soccer teams from England or how teenagers mimic the accents they hear on American television. This shouldn't be lamented, since the way in which cultures overlap and influence each other is a good gift from God. Something is wrong if our way of life is not impacted in any

exchange. Shaped by his own cultural context in Argentina, he has encouraged Christians to open themselves up to the wisdom and insight to be found in indigenous societies. But we don't have to seek exotic voices from far away to explore such wisdom. Ireland has its own indigenous culture and language. One negative drawback of how influenced we are by our bigger neighbours is that we forget this.

Let me give you a concrete example: *meitheal*. While American and British culture is famously individualistic, Irish indigenous culture was profoundly communal. *Meitheal* was the name we had for one of the ways this worked out. Many readers of *The Messenger* might remember it; indeed in many rural communities it still functions even if the memory of naming it might be lost. *Meitheal* has no equivalent word in English but it refers to when a community, recognising a need, spontaneously organise a collective response. At harvest time, for example, neighbours would band together and help each other out. This reciprocal collaboration was not contractual. They didn't sign legally-binding agreements. They weren't employment deals. Money didn't change hands. It was a response to something too valuable to put a price on it – a recognition that we share goods in common and we must work together to sustain them.

This communal co-operation is almost the exact opposite philosophy to the one that reigns supreme in our broader culture, which prizes individual autonomy and celebrates solitary success. Celebrity culture and the worship of entrepreneurs are the pinnacle expression of this. From the sports field to the Leaving Cert results, our young people are trained to be 'self-sufficient self-starters' and individual enterprisers. This is no bad thing in itself. But if it is all a child is taught, it can be toxic. Imagine the

burden a teenager is placed under when they grow up with such expectation: you, yourself, alone, have to be the author of your own success.

Perhaps we should retrieve the indigenous wisdom of our own culture and adapt this *meitheal* concept for the twenty-first century? It is a perfect expression of what Pope Francis calls 'social friendship'. We understand how it is we should love those who are close to us. But we often struggle to grasp how we can love those we do not know, even if they live at the end of the road.

When Francis talks of social friendship, this is what he means. Christian love, he says, is more than a set of good deeds that originate within us. Christian love, inspired by God's Spirit, comes from outside of us and is directed out from us to others. Every gift God gives us is meant to be shared with others and directed towards the good of others. Francis says, 'only by cultivating this way of relating to one another will we make possible a social friendship that excludes no one' (*Fratelli Tutti*, 94).

Meitheal was a way to share our gifts for the good of those around us, even if they weren't our family or friends. It would be fully in keeping with the best ideas Francis has brought us to think through how it applies in our parishes today and how it might help in times of economic hardship, communal conflict and social integration. ❤️

