“I Have Called You Friends”:
The Nature of Friendship and
Social Media’s Role in Its Cultivation

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Dedicated to the loving memory of

Chelsea Joy Kashergen


May you eternally sing His praises, my dear friend.
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Thesis and Research Questions

Thesis: Friendships cultivated through the abuse of social media seek to fulfill an innate desire to be known, accepted, and loved; but true fulfillment of these longings can only be found in what St. Aelred of Rievaulx calls spiritual friendship, the cultivation of which would exclude a presence on social media platforms.

Research Questions: What is the philosophical and theological nature of friendship? What makes St. Aelred of Rievaulx’s spiritual friendship distinct from Aristotelian friendship? What are the characteristics, qualities, parameters, and limitations of the different types of friendships? What is the purpose of friendship? Is there such a thing as true friendship, versus false kinds of friendship? What effects do social media have on its users? Can we use social media incorrectly? Is it possible to cultivate true friendships on social media platforms?
Introduction

Two summers ago, I worked in a parish office while I was on break from the seminary, and I will never forget what happened on Friday, 21 June 2013. That afternoon, I got to work, sat down at my desk, and waited for the clunky office PC to boot up. Even before I began my day’s tasks, I logged into Facebook to check my newsfeed, and one of the first status messages I saw was from someone with whom I went to high school. It read: “RIP Chelsea Kashergen. There are many of us who cared about you and thought of you whether or not we saw you all the time. You will be missed.” I was immediately in a stupor. I went to high school with a girl named Chelsea Kashergen; indeed, she had been and was one of my closest friends. The suddenness and unforeseen nature of the status left me confused. I did a quick Google search for her name, and the first entry in the search results was entitled, “Chelsea Kashergen, 23, dies after being struck on bike…” The article was short and to the point: she had been bicycling, a delivery truck hit her and she died at the scene. I still could not believe what I was reading, so I phoned her stepfather. “We lost our baby,” he told me. “I’m so sorry,” I responded, choking through the tears.

I grieved Chelsea’s death for a year. Throughout the grieving process, it was not uncommon for me to hear a song that made me think of her and begin to sob unexpectedly. If her tragic passing affected me for that long, I could only imagine what kind of heartache her parents were experiencing. Why did the death of my friend affect me so profoundly and deeply? Why did I grieve for so long? Was it because she was so young? Was it because of some fault in my own character? Or was it because of the nature of our friendship? I strongly suspect it was due to the type of friendship that I had cultivated with Chelsea over the six years I knew her.

During the year after her death, I ruminated extensively about the nature of friendship. What types of friendship are there and of what do they consist? Is it possible to cultivate a long-
distance friendship? If Catholic eschatology is true—and I believe it is—does a friendship end with death or merely change? These were common questions I asked as I continued to process what was a traumatic experience. My reflections about my friendship with Chelsea also led me to think about social media. As children of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, having grown up in the internet age, most of our friendships have some kind of online component to them, or in some cases they are entirely online. Is social media an effective way to cultivate friendships, or is it in fact ruining them?¹

This Capstone project, then, is a methodical presentation of the fruits of my reflections over the last year and a half, using the philosophical skills and techniques I have acquired during my time as an undergraduate student at Mount Angel Seminary. The importance of the issues discussed in this Capstone project for my generation cannot be overstated. The generation of twentysomethings has watered down the fundamental distinction between a friend and an acquaintance, and I feel as if the art of cultivating a friendship is slowly passing away. Additionally, so much of how we interact with each other relies on our presence on social media platforms. Consider the following reflection by Sr. Colleen McGrane, OSB, a Benedictine nun from Clyde, Missouri, who writes:

Growing up, Scrabble was a family tradition. There was an unspoken ritual involved in setting up the game: bringing the box to the kitchen table, taking the board out of the box, setting the dictionary on the table, turning all the tiles over, appointing a scorekeeper, distributing the letter racks, and then drawing to see who would go first. . . . The world has changed. A couple months ago, my twin Kathy e-mailed me to say that she had visited my parents the past weekend and that she and my mom had played Scrabble. They did not sit at the kitchen table
and they did not get out the Scrabble board. Mom sat in one recliner with her Kindle, Kathy sat in another with her iPad and they played online. (McGrane 370)

Technology has allowed us to do some really amazing things, and social media has given us the opportunity to connect with a whole gamut of people all across the globe, but as McGrane writes, “[a]lthough we may not like to admit it, the collective weight of these changes can at times leave us feeling distracted, pressured, always on, disconnected from those whom we value most, and unable to simply be” (370). In this Capstone, I hope to address the problems my generation faces systematically with my own observations and reflections, and then offer a practical solution to that which ails us.

In the first section, entitled “The Nature of Friendship,” I will compare the three types of friendship found in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* to the spiritual friendship proposed by St. Aelred of Rievaulx in his treatise entitled *Spiritual Friendship*. Ultimately, I will argue that the nature of the spiritual friendship that St. Aelred describes is a stronger and more intimate form of friendship than Aristotelian friendship precisely because it is founded on a love of God and a mutual desire to do God’s will. In the second section, entitled “The Contemporary Experience of Friendship,” I will endeavor to examine how the cultural attitudes of hedonism, minimalism, and individualism have negatively affected our relationships. I will also look at the popular cultural view of friendship through a study of some of the positions espoused in the twentieth-century book by Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. This section will conclude with an examination of the characteristics of online friendships, and I will discuss the role that friend-wealth plays in online relationships. By friend-wealth, I simply mean that many in my generation are not content with a few good friends; we would rather have many surface-level acquaintances, and this attitude ends up devaluing the few intimate friendships we do have. In
my third section, entitled “Cultivating Friendships,” I will discuss the very idea of cultivating friendship: of how, both theoretically and practically, to cultivate both Aristotelian friendships and Aelredian friendships. In my fourth and final section, entitled “The Question of Social Media,” I will concede that there is a proper way to use social media platforms, but I will ultimately argue that social media is not an efficient way to cultivate a true friendship because social media does not respect the necessary limitations, conditions, and the fundamental nature of spiritual friendships. Finally, some brief points will be made to discuss the potential benefits of unplugging and deactivating or outright deleting one’s online accounts. I hope that my reflections in this Capstone project serve as encouragement to readers of my generation to reflect on friendship, the role of technology, and social media in their lives and to take practical steps, whatever those may be, in order to seek more fulfilling and intimate relationships.

In short, I will argue that friendships cultivated through the abuse of social media seek to fulfill an innate desire to be known, accepted, and loved; but true fulfillment of these longings can only be found in what St. Aelred of Rievaulx calls spiritual friendship, the cultivation of which would exclude a presence on social media platforms. With St. Aelred, I now entreat you, my dear reader: “[S]hould anyone draw profit from reading this treatise, let him give thanks to God and ask for Christ’s mercy upon my sins. But if anyone deems what I have written superfluous or impractical, let him pardon my unhappy position whose occupations forced me to put limits on the thought I could give to this meditation” (Aelred 47).

**The Nature of Friendship**

Before one can say with any confidence whether the use of social media is an effective way to cultivate friendships, what is meant by friendship must first be clarified. What is the
nature of friendship? What are its qualities and characteristics? Are there several types of friendship or does the term encompass a number of different more-or-less intimate associations between people? These are the questions which are of interest. In other words, a theory of friendship must first be developed in order to be later applied to the question of social media.

One does not walk alone in this task, for many before have written discourses on the subject of friendship. In order to construct such a theory, therefore, it would behoove one to draw upon the works of two wise men: the ancient philosopher Aristotle\(^2\) (b. 384 BC) and the twelfth-century Cistercian Abbot of Rievaulx, Saint Aelred\(^3\) (b. 1110 AD). Just as the Roman poet Virgil guided Dante through the various levels of Hell in his *Inferno*, one should allow Aristotle and St. Aelred to be their guides during our reflections on the question of friendship.

*A Philosophy of Friendship*

In order to develop a philosophy of friendship, something must first be said about natural friendship. The twentieth-century English apologist and theologian C.S. Lewis calls friendship “the least *natural* of loves; the least instinctive, organic, biological, gregarious and necessary” (Lewis, “Friendship” 39). What is meant, then, by natural friendship is simply that it can apparently be cultivated by one’s own human efforts and that it does not necessarily have union with God and eternal life as its purpose or final cause.\(^4\)

The eighth book of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* will be predominantly relied upon in order to expound the essence of this natural friendship. It goes without saying that the nature of friendship is tightly wound up with the topic of love, and as Aristotle’s *Ethics* is further examined, it is helpful to note the following:

Although it is difficult to avoid the term ‘friendship’ as a translation of ‘philia,’
and this is an accurate term for the kind of relationship he is most interested in, we should bear in mind that he is discussing a wider range of phenomena than this translation might lead us to expect, for the Greeks use the term, ‘philia,’ to name the relationship that holds among family members, and do not reserve it for voluntary relationships. (Kraut)

Recognizing the difficulty in adequately translating Aristotle’s sense of philia need not lessen anything that one might endeavor to say about the nature of friendship; one should simply accept that no translation will be perfect or capture the entirety of the author’s intended meaning. To gain the fullest sense of his meaning, two translations of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* will be used: the much more literal translation from Greek to English by Hippocrates G. Apostle and the translation from F.H. Peters, which seems to be more dynamically equivalent.

The discipline of philosophy has “long recognized that friendship plays a central role in a meaningful and happy life” (Badhwar 1). Indeed, Aristotle begins his discourse on friendship with this comment: “friendship is a virtue or something with virtue, and, besides, it is most necessary to life; for no one would choose to live without friends, though he were to have all other goods” (Aristotle, trans. Apostle 140). There are many goods one might willingly live without. For example, the vegetarian might choose to live without the consumption of meat and the consecrated virgin would choose to live without the genital expression of sexuality, but Aristotle believes that no one in their right mind would choose to live without friendship.

Aristotle then acknowledges that “disagreements concerning friendships are not few” (141). There are many philosophies about the subject and there are several definitions of friendship. This is true both in the twenty-first century, where every association and relationship on Facebook is given the distinction “friend,” and it was also true in the philosophical landscape
of the ancients, where friendship was described using a multitude of different phrases like “birds of a feather flock together” (141) and “sweetest harmonies from different tones arise” (141), to mention just a couple. Aristotle, though, wanted to present a holistic and systematic treatment on the subject of friendship. To this end, he offered the following definition of friendship, which will be examined in detail: “To be friends, then, two men should be well-disposed towards each other and wish each other’s good without being unaware of this” (142).

Firstly, in order to be Aristotelian friends, two people must be well-disposed and wish each other’s good. Aristotle says that “there is friendship when good will is reciprocal” (142). Only with difficulty could one devise a situation in which two people who are called friends wish the ill of each other; this could hardly be called friendship. In order to be friends, they must also be aware of the other’s good wishes, for “[o]ne who thus wishes the good of another is called a well-wisher, when the wish is not reciprocated; when the well-wishing is mutual, it is called friendship” (Aristotle, trans. Peters 162). The meaning of “well-disposed” is clarified in another translation, which reads that two friends must “be aware of each other’s feelings” (162). This is what C.S. Lewis meant when he wrote: “Eros will have naked bodies; Friendship naked personalities” (Lewis, Four Loves ch. 3). A fundamental condition of friendship, then, is knowledge of the other’s dispositions. Essentially, in his definition of friendship, Aristotle asserts that two people must actually like each other, will the good of the other, and that each be aware of this. This seems obvious. One might be tempted to think that this is something which goes without saying, but these conditions of Aristotelian friendship may in fact exclude several contemporary friendships, which will be examined in a later section.

Secondly, in order to be friends, two people must will each other’s good “from one of . . . three motives” (Aristotle, trans. Peters 162), and these motives provide the basis for the three
types of Aristotelian friendship. The first and lowest type of natural friendship is called the “friendship of the useful.” This exists between two people “whose love is based on the useful” (163) and who do not wish each other’s good for their own sake, “but only in so far as each gets some good from the other” (163). Friendship of the useful springs out of a discourse that might be described thusly: “You can help me out? I can help you out! Then let’s be friends.” Aristotle rightly asserts that what is useful to us “does not persist long but changes from time to time. So when the cause of men’s friendship is broken, their friendship too is dissolved, since friendship exists in relation to that cause” (Aristotle, trans. Apostle 143). It is the lowest type of friendship precisely because it is so easily dissolved when the other person is no longer useful.

The second type of natural friendship is called the “friendship of the pleasurable.” This exists between two people who provide some kind of pleasure to each other, which can be either physical or mental. The contemporary abuse of friendship dubbed “friends with benefits” might qualify as a friendship of the pleasurable, as would associations between people who merely like the same kinds of activities or hobbies or who find each other humorous. Like friendships of the useful, friendships of the pleasurable are fleeting, since the types of things in which one takes pleasure certainly vacillate from time to time. Aristotle also thought that friendships of the pleasurable occur most often between young people, “for they live by their passions and pursue mostly what is pleasurable to themselves and what exists at the moment” (143), “and what exists at the moment, of course, is mostly limited to what is sensed; so the pleasures of the young are mostly those of the senses” (Apostle 321). These first two kinds of Aristotelian friendships are described as accidental (Aristotle, trans. Peters 163), since people are only loved because of some attribute. Two people in a friendship of the useful do not love each other because they are good in themselves, but only insofar as they are useful to each other; the same is true for
friendships of the pleasurable. For Aristotle, friendships of the useful and pleasurable are considered imperfect types of friendship, evidenced when he says that they are “defective, and have a smaller claim to be called ‘friendships,’ because the individuals involved have little trust in each other, quarrel frequently, and are ready to break off their association abruptly” (Kraut). St. Aelred, as will be seen in a later section, takes a startling position: there is no friendship apart from Jesus Christ. Aristotle, though, does not outright say that the lesser friendships are not friendships, but only that they have a smaller claim to the title.

Finally, the third and highest type of natural friendship is called the “friendship of the virtuous”. This exists between two people who are good and are alike with respect to virtue; for, insofar as they are good, it is in a similar manner that they wish each other’s goods, and such men are good in themselves. Now those who wish the good of their friends for the sake of their friends are friends in the highest degree; for they are so disposed because of what they are and not in virtue of an attribute. (Aristotle, trans. Apostle 143)

People in this type of friendship are “persons of equally good moral character (virtue)” (Kowalski, ch. 2). One might naturally wonder whether it is required that two people be perfectly virtuous in order to cultivate a friendship of the virtuous. The Aristotelian translator Hippocrates G. Apostle comments that “perhaps ‘alike with respect to virtue’ refers to those virtues which are common to the two friends; for it is unlikely that both friends have all the virtues” (Apostle 321). For Aristotle, a friendship of the virtuous is the highest type of friendship, precisely because one wishes the good of the other for their own sake—because they are good in themselves—and not because of one of their attributes (e.g., usefulness to us or pleasurableness to us). If questioned about the reason for their friendship, the colloquially-phrased answer “just ’cause” might rightly
be offered, since “they will be friends just because they are good” (Aristotle, trans. Apostle 146). This kind of friendship is the most lasting of the three and it “cannot be harmed by slander; for it is not easy for a good man to believe what anyone says about his good friend who has stood the test of time” (145). It would be ridiculous to think that because two people are in a friendship of the virtuous they would not be able to enjoy the attributes of utility and pleasure in each other. Indeed, at the very least, they will find each other pleasing because of their virtuous disposition, and they will find each other useful because this same disposition encourages each other to persevere and grow in virtue. Aristotle acknowledges that “[t]he good man . . . is both pleasant and useful” (Aristotle, trans. Peters 168). It should also be noted that friendships of the virtuous “are admittedly rare; when they do obtain, it is because the friends spend a great deal of time together, developing a secure mutual trust” (Kowalski, ch. 2). Aristotle thinks that these friendships are rare precisely because “it is not easy for one man to find at one time many very agreeable persons, perhaps not many good ones” (Aristotle, trans. Peters 168). To foreshadow St. Aelred’s position on the matter, “divine authority approves that more are to be received into the bosom of charity than into the embrace of friendship” (Aelred 58). In dealing with a disagreeable person, it has often been said: we have to love everyone, but we do not have to like everyone.

In the seventh chapter of Book VIII of his Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle discusses the friendships between “sour and older men” (Aristotle, trans. Apostle 147). He writes that while “such men may still be well disposed towards each other, . . . they are hardly friends because they neither spend their days together nor enjoy each other’s company, and these things most of all are thought to be marks of friendship” (147). One can see, then, that enjoying each other and spending time in each other’s company are the final characteristics of natural friendship according to Aristotle, and it will be important to bear these characteristics in mind when the
contemporary experience of friendship is examined in a later section.

The twentieth-century British philosopher Julia Annas summed up Aristotle’s treatment of natural friendship in this way: “[a] friend, then, is one who (1) wishes and does good (or apparently good) things to a friend, for the friend’s sake, (2) wishes the friend to exist and live, for his own sake, (3) spends time with his friend, (4) makes the same choices as his friend and (5) finds the same things pleasant and painful as his friend” (qtd. in Helm). Having now explored the nature, qualities, and characteristics of Aristotelian friendship, the next section will propose a theology of friendship based on St. Aelred of Rievaulx’s spiritual friendship.

A Theology of Friendship

As has been said before, the topic of friendship is closely intertwined with the topic of love, and since “God is love” (Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition, 1 John 4:8), one would do well to present a theology of friendship from a Catholic Christian perspective. Just as Aristotle was a guide through a philosophy of friendship, St. Aelred of Rievaulx and his treatise on spiritual friendship is a guide for the musings which ensue, namely an exposition of the nature of spiritual friendship.

Let us begin where our original parents began: in the sweetness and comfort of the Garden of Eden. God created the first human being, Adam, and he existed in a state of original justice, that is, “the graced state of the first human beings before they fell into sin” (O’Collins 183). In this state, there was no sin, no suffering, and no death. There was simply union with God, the Creator of all that is good, true, and beautiful – it was a graced state, a blessed existence. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that “[t]he first man was not only created good, but was also established in friendship with his Creator and in harmony with himself and
with the creation around him, in a state that would be surpassed only by the glory of the new creation in Christ” (*Catechism* 374). In the state of original justice, God was Adam’s friend and Adam needed no other. God alone was enough. Yet, in the second creation story of the Book of Genesis, the Lord exclaims, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen 2:18). So, the Lord formed all the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth to be a companion for Adam, but “there was not found a helper fit for him” (Gen 2:20). In response to this,

> the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’ (Gen 2:21-23)

At last, there was found a helper fit for Adam, and her name was Eve: “[a]nd the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (Gen 2:25). They were naked both in body and in personality, and there was no shame between them – a graced state, a blessed existence.

If God alone was enough for Adam, then why did God need to create a companion for him? Even more basically: if God is “supremely powerful and supremely good” and he needs nothing outside himself, “neither man, nor angel, nor heaven, nor earth, nor anything which these contain” (Aelred 62), then why did God create Adam in the first place? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* answers the latter question marvelously in its opening paragraph: “God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life” (*Catechism* 1). God did not need to create the human race. Creation “is not the product of any necessity whatever, nor of blind fate or chance” (295).
Rather, and more even wonderfully, he wanted to create us so that we could have a “share in his being, wisdom, and goodness” (295). In the fullest and truest sense of the word, this is an awesome reality. Yet, another question comes to mind, which in part answers the initial inquiry of this paragraph: how exactly does man share in the blessed life of God? God is a community of persons—for “[w]e do not confess three Gods, but one God in three persons” (253)—and God is a community of love, since “God’s very being is love” (221). One can see, then, that God created Eve precisely so Adam could share in the blessed life of God, which is a community of love.

How does this work? Theologian Christopher West writes, in his primer on Pope St. John Paul II’s masterpiece, *Theology of the Body*:

> God created us male and female so that we could image his love by becoming a sincere gift to each other. This sincere giving establishes a ‘community of persons’ not only between the sexes but also—in the normal course of events—with a ‘third’ who proceeds from them both. In this way, sexual love [but also the other forms of love, including friendship] becomes an icon or earthly image in some sense of the inner life of the Trinity. (West, ch. 1)

It should be clear, then, that if the life of God is a community of persons whose very being is love, then the only way for us to share in this blessed life is to experience a community of persons in love. This sheds significant light on God’s exclamation: “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen 2:18). Without the experience of the other, one cannot fully participate in God’s inner life of love.

This answer also provides the theological framework for understanding St. Aelred, who writes about the divine origin of friendship. He writes that God has willed “that peace encompass all his creatures and society unite them; and thus all creatures obtain from him, who is supremely
and purely one, some trace of that unity. For that reason he has left no type of beings alone, but out of many has drawn them together by means of a certain society” (Aelred 62). In other words, when people are united in love with those around them, they actually and concretely participate in the unity of God. Later, St. Aelred writes:

when God created man, in order to commend more highly the good of society, he said: ‘It is not good for man to be alone: let us make him a helper like unto himself.’ It was from no similar, nor even from the same, material that divine Might formed this help mate, but as a clearer inspiration to charity and friendship he produced the woman from the very substance of the man. How beautiful it is that the second human being was taken from the side of the first, so that nature might teach that human beings are equal and, as it were, collateral, and that there is in human affairs neither a superior nor an inferior, a characteristic of friendship. (63)

From what has been said about a theology of friendship thus far, it is clear that friendship exists so that the human race can have some share in the blessed life of God, which is love and goodness and unity. If, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, we existed in a pre-fallen state or a state of original justice, everyone would be our friend, since we would love everyone perfectly. Douglass Roby writes that “[i]n the world as it ought to have been, there would have been no distinction between charity and friendship: we would have freely and properly loved our neighbor, and in enjoying this love the law would have had no claim on us” (Roby 23). Yet, this is not the way things are. Adam and Eve disobeyed God and let their trust in their Creator die in their hearts (Catechism 397). Consequently, we experience the effects of original sin, namely “human nature is weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering and the domination of
death, and inclined to sin” (418). After they disobeyed God, “the eyes of both [Adam and Eve] were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons” (Gen 3:7). In a state of original justice, Adam and Eve were shameless in the nakedness of their bodies and personalities. In a state of original sin, they are ashamed of their naked bodies and personalities. They hide themselves from God and from each other; original sin has seriously affected their relationship with God, and it has wounded their friendship.

The state of friendship before original sin has now been examined. It might also be helpful to consider what the experience of friendship will be after Jesus Christ “comes at the end of time to judge the living and the dead” (Catechism 682). In the experience of living with the effects of original sin, friendship, when it is true, becomes an eschatological sign of the reality about relationships in eternity among the saints and angels of God. This means that what is experienced here in this life is a foretaste of what is to come – true friendship becomes a foretaste of what relationships will be like in eternity. St. Aelred writes that “[t]his is true and eternal friendship, which begins in this life and is perfected in the next, which here belongs to the few where few are good, but there belongs to all where all are good” (Aelred 111). Later, St. Aelred writes that until Christ comes again, a probationary period before we admit one another into our friendship “is necessary since there is a mingling of wise and unwise; there [in Heaven] they need no probation, since an angelic and, in a certain manner, divine perfection beatifies them” (111). A later section will discuss St. Aelred’s thoughts on the cultivation of true friendship in depth, but suffice it to say presently that in the life to come, we will all experience friendship as it was once experienced in the Garden of Eden between our original parents. We will be united with one another in a community of love and we will be shameless of our naked personalities.
A survey has now been made of St. Aelred’s thoughts on the experience of friendship in a pre-fallen and a post-sanctified state, but what does he say about the experience of friendship here and now? What is friendship like for members of the Church Militant, for the strangers and sojourners whose home is the Heavenly Jerusalem? What, finally, is spiritual friendship?

At the risk of an anticlimax, one might first wonder: who cares about what St. Aelred says? Aristotle expounded well enough on the philosophical nature of friendship. What else can possibly be said on the subject, and why is a theology of friendship needed anyway? One answer to this question can be found by turning back to Aristotle, who said that “a friend does not wish his friends the greatest of all goods, that he should be a god; for then he would lose a friend” (Aristotle, trans. Peters 170). Remember that for Aristotle, in order for two people to be friends, they must be alike in virtue. If one person exceeded another in virtue and became a god, the two would no longer be friends. If Aristotle were speaking in a Christian framework, he might say that one should not will another person’s holiness, since he would no longer be on the same level of virtue if he indeed became holy. Yet, the fifth chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, proclaims that “everyone, that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity; by this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society” (“Dogmatic”). We are all, regardless of the circumstances of our lives, called to be great saints. St. Aelred noted that it was “evident that Tullius [Cicero] was unacquainted with the virtue of true friendship, since he was completely unaware of its beginning and end, Christ” (Aelred 53). The same could be said of Aristotle: however brilliant and philosophically gifted he was, he did not know Jesus Christ. St. Aelred, “convinced that true friendship cannot exist among those who live without Christ” (54), deserves one’s attention, then, so that she might learn what kinds of
associations are true friendships in Christ and what are merely “referred to as friendships only by the abuse of popular speech” (Roby 20).

St. Aelred, who devoured *On Friendship* by the Roman philosopher Cicero when he was “still just a lad” (Aelred 45), borrows his definition of friendship directly from Cicero, who defines friendship as “mutual harmony in affairs human and divine coupled with benevolence and charity” (qtd. in Aelred 53). St. Aelred explains that perhaps charity “expresses an affection of the heart” and benevolence means “carrying it out in deed” (Aelred 54). This definition is strikingly similar to Aristotle’s definition of friendship. Recall that for Aristotle, two friends must be well-disposed toward one another, will each other’s good because of one of three motives (i.e., utility, pleasure, and virtue), and each be aware of this; furthermore, they should enjoy each other’s company and spend time with each other. For St. Aelred, two friends must also like each other and will the other’s good – St. Aelred muses this is what Cicero meant by the terms benevolence and charity. For Aristotle, the highest form of friendship was a source of happiness in this life; for St. Aelred, friendship “is a means to Christian perfection” (Laker 46), which inevitably brings about true happiness. Furthermore, St. Aelred also talks about three different kinds of friendships: carnal friendship, worldly friendship, and spiritual friendship. “The carnal,” he writes, “springs from mutual harmony in vice; the worldly is enkindled by the hope of gain; and the spiritual is cemented by similarity of life, morals, and pursuits among the just” (Aelred 59). Carnal and worldly friendships are “referred to as friendships only by the abuse of popular speech” (Roby 20), and it is clear that the only true friendship for St. Aelred is what he calls spiritual friendship.

Apart from the definition, Aristotle and St. Aelred share other similarities in their views on the nature of friendship. In Aristotle’s friendship of the virtuous, one wills the good of the
other for her own sake because she is good in herself; likewise, spiritual friendship for St. Aelred “should be desired, not for consideration of any worldly advantage or for any extrinsic cause, but from the *dignity of its own nature* and the feelings of the human heart, so that its fruition and reward is nothing other than itself” (emphasis added; Aelred 60). Aristotelian friendship includes an intimacy between persons; likewise, St. Aelred said that “[w]e embrace very many with every affection, but yet in such a way that we do not admit them to the secrets of friendship, which consists especially in the revelation of all our confidences and plans” (112). In discussing the intimacy of friendship, St. Aelred points to Jesus Christ, who in the Gospel of St. John said to his Apostles, “You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:14-15). Following Our Lord’s example, a critical characteristic of St. Aelred’s spiritual friendship is honesty and transparency between persons; deception has no place in a spiritual friendship.

The similarities in Aristotle’s and St. Aelred’s thoughts should be striking, given the nearly fifteen hundred years of history that separated them. There are, however, at least three considerable differences between their theories of friendship. The first difference is in relation to willing the highest good of one’s friend. Because true friendship exists between two people who are alike in virtue, Aristotle would not approve of willing the highest good of one’s friend. Consider the following scenario: if Bob willed the highest good of his friend Nancy, Nancy’s virtue would necessarily exceed that of Bob’s, and this would mean that, by definition, Bob and Nancy could no longer remain friends. Friendship, for Aristotle, exists between two people who are alike in virtue. St. Aelred, on the other hand, envisions friendship as a means of sanctification and would be in favor to willing the highest good of one’s friend. He might point to Jesus’ words
in the Gospel of St. John: “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). As Fr. Jeremy Driscoll, OSB, a monk and theologian from St. Benedict, Oregon, notes: “When I love friends in Christ and love them as Christ loved me—willing to lay down my life for them—and those friends know my love in this way and love me in return, then a tremendous circle is created, a communion which is nothing less than communion in the Trinity” (Driscoll 72). Spiritual friendship, then, can be cultivated between two people who are on different levels of virtue. The second difference is that St. Aelred explicitly includes God in his nature of true friendship. He “looked at friendship from the divine perspective, insisting that it springs directly from God, who in the overflowing of his love created men to share his love by loving each other and himself” (Roby 23). This is a non-negotiable element in St. Aelred’s thought: friendship, if it is true, cannot exist apart from Jesus Christ. St. Aelred writes, “[f]or what more sublime can be said of friendship, what more true, what more profitable, than that it ought to, and is proved to, begin in Christ, continue in Christ, and be perfected in Christ?” (Aelred 53). Spiritual friendship is the most intimate type of friendship because as a form of love, friendship cannot be separated from God, “since all love is one and has its source in God” (Roby 20). This is not to say that true friendship is the opposite of the apparent friendships of the worldly and carnal; rather, it is the perfection of these friendships in Jesus Christ, the Divine Friend. The third difference has to do with the dissolution of friendships. Even though friendships of the virtuous are the longest lasting of the three types of natural friendships, Aristotle seems open to the idea that they can be dissolved, evidenced when he says that “when the cause of men’s friendship is broken, their friendship too is dissolved” (Aristotle, trans. Apostle 143). St. Aelred, on the other hand, frequently quotes St. Jerome (b. 347 AD) in his *Spiritual Friendship*, who said that “[a] friendship which can cease to be was never true
friendship” (qtd. in Aelred 56).

Finally, what are the benefits of a spiritual friendship which is rooted in the God who is love? St. Aelred viewed friendship as a practical way to grow in holiness and Christian perfection, and he said that “friendship is a stage bordering upon that perfection which consists in the love and knowledge of God, so that man from being a friend of his fellowman becomes a friend of God” (Aelred 73). True love expressed in friendship never distracts one from God but always leads back to God who is the source of all love. Furthermore, “friendship bears fruit in this life and in the next. It manifests all the virtues by its own charms; it assails vices by its own virtue; it tempers adversity and moderates prosperity. As a result, scarcely any happiness whatever can exist among mankind without friendship” (71), “[s]ince God built a need for love into our nature” (Roby 24). So great is this innate desire to be loved and to be happy, that “even evil men feel a need for false friendship as a solace in their misery” (24). Finally, in spiritual friendship, there is “a terribly intimate communion with God that creates a terrible intimacy and communion among believing friends. This is a sweet, mystic communion of intense quality” (Driscoll 73). In spiritual friendship there is a union of hearts, minds, and wills. This communion of persons in Christ is what makes spiritual friendship so strong and enduring.

A considerable amount of time has been spent unpacking the nature of friendship from both philosophical and theological perspectives. This was done in order to build a solid foundation upon which the question can eventually be asked, “Is social media an effective way to cultivate friendship?” It is now evident that the term friendship does not apply to all kinds of associations but only to those in which two people are well-disposed toward each other, will each other’s good, and are both aware of this. Furthermore, four distinct types of friendship can be spoken of: friendships of the useful, pleasurable, and virtuous, and spiritual friendship. Spiritual
friendship is the most intimate of the four types, precisely because it is rooted in the love of God and a mutual desire to do the Lord’s will and it resembles most clearly the way that the saints and angels of God will be united for all of eternity. Friendships of the virtuous and spiritual friendships (the latter being the perfection of the former) will be hereafter considered true friendships.

The aforementioned makes up the essential content of a theory of friendship. Undoubtedly, this is a theory of ideal friendship. When a person looks around at the associations of different people in his life, he sees that many friendships indeed fall short of the ideal. There is, however, still great value in a knowledge of the nature of ideal friendships. As Christopher West points out about sexuality, “We cannot actually return to the state of innocence—we have left that behind. But by following Christ we can receive God’s original plan for the sexes and live it with Christ’s help” (West, ch. 2). The same can ultimately be said about friendship: though our experience of friendship is certainly different now than what it was in the Garden of Eden and what it will be in Heaven, we can receive God’s original plan for friendship when we follow Christ and cooperate with his grace. In the next section, the current state of friendships, more-or-less far from the ideal, will be discussed. Later, theoretical and practical ways to cultivate Aristotelian and Aelredian friendships will be offered.

The Contemporary Experience of Friendship

It can be somewhat difficult to begin to talk about the contemporary experience of friendship, for what can one say that is more illuminating than what Aristotle said or more inspiring than was written by St. Aelred? Likely, when a person observes the relationships among people in her life, she finds what is referred to as a “mixed bag of nuts.” There are those
who find each other humorous, those who like the same sorts of hobbies and recreation, and those who stimulate each other intellectually. One also finds study groups at the university and work relationships where both people benefit in some way. Then, there are those friends who are virtually inseparable, who might display substantial differences in their personalities, but they are friends nonetheless, and it does not look like things will change any time soon. In the end, one finds himself agreeing with Aristotle’s observations of life in ancient times: there are basically three different kinds of friendship. Moreover, if one knew of St. Aelred or any of the other monastics who wrote on the topic of spiritual friendship (e.g., St. John Cassian), he might find himself adding a fourth and calling it the perfection of Aristotle’s friendship of the virtuous. So, what is the purpose of commenting on the contemporary experience of friendship if seemingly nothing new is added to the conversation?

It will be argued, of course, that this section is not entirely pointless. It may be odd to phrase it like this, but in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, while Aristotle was making observations about real associations surrounding him, he was also providing the ideal form of the three kinds of friendships. One type of friendship is higher than the others, but there is an ideal expression of all three. Then, St. Aelred writes of friendship in its perfected form. This section, then, will examine the prevalent attitudes of twenty-first century American culture and how these attitudes affect the experience of friendship, such that it falls short of the ideal. Then, a discussion of remedies to that which ails us will be had.

What are some characteristics of today’s friendships? The very term “today” situates one in a particular historical context. Consider the following story of a girl named Krista, recounted in an issue of the magazine on American culture, *Chronicles*:

Krista is truly a child of the Internet Age. Born in 1990 and reared in an affluent
household by well-educated parents, she has been immersed in online media and a variety of digital role-playing games for most of her life, and, like so many ‘twentysomethings,’ she manipulates her cellphone so adeptly that it seems more like a prosthesis than a communications tool—though she was polite enough to keep it mostly concealed during our talks. She maintains profiles on a number of social-media sites, including Facebook, of course, and much of her social life is conducted online with ‘friends’ whom she sees, if at all, only rarely. Indeed, she admitted that her ‘best’ friend is another young woman about her age who spends much of her time traveling the globe; they maintain contact on Facebook, but have not met face-to-face for over a year. (Trotter 16-17)

American culture experienced in the twenty-first century is strikingly different than the cultures of Aristotle and St. Aelred. The story recounted above provides some insight into the contemporary experience of friendship. In the so-called internet age, technology seems to be more of a “prosthesis than a communication tool” – an extension of our very selves instead of simply an aid to living. Many contemporary friendships, therefore, have some kind of online component that accounts for a large portion, if not the entirety, of time spent “together.” The difficulties associated with this particular facet of contemporary friendships will eventually be expounded. Likely, more than a few twentysomethings would resonate strongly with Krista’s story, and it is in this historical context that the present topic is situated.

_The Effects of Practical Philosophies on Friendship_

In his “Letter to Artists,” the Canadian Catholic iconographer and novelist Michael D.
O’Brien offers the following warning to fellow artists:

Beware [of] the current schools of criticism and norms in fiction and the other arts. Please don’t bow to them, don’t succumb to their rationale, which would bend and reshape your beautiful gift according to their subjective criteria and their blurred motives. Don’t become a victim of this colossal peer pressure. Don’t become a tool in the hands of the state, or the academy, or an art-guru, or any other dimension of the social revolution that is presently afflicting Western civilization. (O’Brien, “A Letter”)

In his letter, he identifies several different cultural attitudes to which artists might succumb:

“thoughts or impulses that [tend] in the direction of ambition (even disguised as ambition ‘for the sake of God’s kingdom’), self-promotion, manipulation, climbing the ladder of success” (O’Brien, “A Letter”). O’Brien’s letter encourages artists not to let their art be tainted by these different cultural attitudes on art.

The motivational Catholic speaker Matthew Kelly, admittedly at the popular level, also identifies areas of colossal peer pressure from the culture, recognizing that “[e]very culture is the fruit of the ideas and attitudes of its people” (Kelly 31). In his book Rediscover Catholicism, Kelly briefly identifies the prevailing philosophical attitudes of our culture. He proposes “that there are three major practical philosophies upon which we have constructed our modern culture” (32), and they are individualism, hedonism, and minimalism. This section will examine how each of these three philosophical attitudes affects the theory of friendship that has been proposed in the previous section.

According to Kelly, the first of the three philosophies that dominates our culture is individualism, which is “based on an all-consuming concern for self” (33). Kelly says that “[n]o
community, whether as small as a family or as large as a nation, can grow strong with this attitude. Individualism always weakens the community and causes the whole to suffer. In every instance it is a cancerous growth” (33). True friendship, as aforementioned, is experienced as a community of persons in love – a mirror of Trinitarian love and an eschatological sign of a reality about love that is already-but-not-yet. Friendship must necessarily suffer when one or both parties are affected by the cancer of individualism. People begin to think only of themselves, and one of the necessary conditions for friendship—that is, willing the good of the other—disappears. When one no longer wills the other’s good, the friendship also dissolves, and what remains is a mere association of persons not dignified enough to bear the name of friendship. In the case of a friendship of the virtuous, another necessary condition—that is, liking the other for her own sake, because she is good in herself—disappears. It is clear that when one asks the question “What’s in it for me?” (33), the friendship is reduced to a friendship of the useful, since a person who suffers from individualism does not like the other by virtue of their self but only insofar as they are useful. Since the “fruits of individualism are . . . greed, selfishness, and exploitation” (33), it is clear, then, that individualism disintegrates the ideal experience of friendship.

Kelly proposes that the second of the three philosophies that dominates our culture is hedonism, which “emphasizes pleasure as the ultimate goal in life” (34); its fruits are laziness, lust, and gluttony. If one is interested in cultivating true friendship—and one should be—then she cannot have as her motto: “If it feels good, do it!” (34). If she followed this motto, all of her friendships would unavoidably devolve into friendships of the pleasurable, since she would always be moving from one pleasure to another. She would never be able to endure disagreement and arguments among friends (“Disagreements do not make me feel good!”), and she would
much more easily break off those friendships in order to find a more amenable association. A true friendship should not always make one feel good, but it should always encourage him to be good. Oftentimes forgiveness is a necessary aspect of friendship. Paul J. Wadell, a religious studies professor at St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wisconsin, writes that “benevolence and beneficence [in friendship] must be expressed through forgiveness. We care for our friends, but they can hurt and disappoint us, sometimes deeply. Friends may seek our good, but they can also fail us, neglect us, and even betray us” (Wadell 32). One is not meant to run away from suffering and embrace pleasure; she is meant, rather, to “rejoice in so far as you share Christ’s sufferings” (1 Pet 4:13), and if she “can be sure that a love that is not willing to suffer will never be fruitful” (Woelkers 2), then she can also be sure that a friendship (rooted in love) that is not willing to endure small sufferings—“[t]he annoyances, the inconveniences, the challenges, the difficulties, the humiliations, the sadness, the losses, the pain, the failures” (2)—will not last.

According to Kelly, the final philosophy that dominates our culture is minimalism. One who suffers from minimalism always seeks “to exert the minimum effort and receive the maximum reward” (Kelly 34); it “is the enemy of excellence and the father of mediocrity” (35). How does minimalism undermine the nature or goal of friendship? The answer is found by returning to Aristotle, who “appreciated the central role of friendship in one’s ongoing transformation in goodness and virtue” (Wadell 25). For Aristotle, true friendship is a means to grow in virtue and a necessary part of any happy life; for St. Aelred, it is a means of sanctification and Christian perfection. One cannot grow in virtue, which is acquired fundamentally by discipline and habitual action, if he is immersed in minimalism. He will lack the energy and motivation to do so, and he will abound all the more in vicious behavior, since “human nature is weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering and the domination of
death, and inclined to sin” (Catechism 418). Likewise, he cannot hope to grow in sanctification, which is inseparable from living a virtuous life, if he cannot imitate the example of Jesus Christ, who did not give in to the lure of minimalism, but who rather offered himself in love to the maximum on the cross.11 We, too, must offer ourselves to the maximum, both to God and in our relationships with one another. As the twentieth-century Italian bishop Servant of God Guglielmo Giaquinta wrote, “God wants to be loved in return in a measure that equals His—that is, to the maximum. What is this ‘maximum’? It is the totality—everything of which we are capable” (Giaquinta 7). How exactly do we do this? Simply by responding to God’s love totally. We see this most clearly in Bishop Giaquinta’s Pro Sanctity Creed: “I believe in You, Father, God of love. Your love for us is infinite and You ask of us in return a response of total love” (2). Essentially, minimalism destroys the very motivation needed to cultivate friendship, and one ends up wanting to acquire friends quickly and painlessly.

Individualism, hedonism, and minimalism are exterminators of true friendships, and people should seek freedom from them and their fruits in their lives by cooperating with God’s grace and seeking to do his will. The longevity and intimacy of one’s friendships may depend upon this.

The Popular Culture’s View of Friendship

One could not think of a better test case for the contemporary experience of friendship than the ideas espoused in Dale Carnegie’s book How to Win Friends and Influence People. Goodreads, a social media website that connects book lovers and allows them to rate books that they have read, describes Carnegie’s book as “a timeless bestseller, packed with rock-solid advice that has carried thousands of now famous people up the ladder of success in their business
and personal lives” and it boasts that you can “[l]earn the six ways to make people like you, the
twelve ways to win people to your way of thinking, and the nine ways to change people without
arousing resentment” ("How to Win"). Although it was first published in 1936, it has since “sold
more than 15 million copies” ("How to Win"). Goodreads has recorded a total of 143,536 user
 ratings of all the editions of How to Win Friends and Influence People, which received an
average user rating of 4.04 stars out of 5. Forty-one percent of users gave Carnegie’s book a five-
star rating, 31% gave it a four-star rating, and 19% assigned three stars. Only 7% of users rated it
1 or 2 stars. To state it bluntly, people love this book.

There seem to be three major problems with Carnegie’s book. The first is in the
 nomenclature: Carnegie continuously describes friendship as something that is won. This has the
effect of lowering the status of friendship, since it ultimately objectifies people and diminishes
them to things being won like prizes at a carnival. Already, there seems to be an ulterior motive
in the use of Carnegie’s book: people want to succeed in some personal or professional endeavor
and they want to use other people to help them get there. They want to make people like them.
This is clear both from the description of the book above and from the prize nomenclature. One
Goodreads reviewer wrote that How to Win Friends and Influence People

is a handbook on how to exploit friendship for the sake of financial and political
gain. Now fans of this book . . . will say this book helped them overcome their
shyness and make real friendships. But Dale Carnegie is not interested in real
 friendship. His only concern is to exploit friendship for financial and political
gain. ("Paul’s Reviews")

The kind of friendship that Carnegie is encouraging would be, at best, an Aristotelian friendship
of the useful, but not as a friendship of the virtuous and certainly not a spiritual friendship. In
fact, if St. Aelred could say one thing to Dale Carnegie, it might be these words from the second book of *Spiritual Friendship*: “Heaven forbid that I should grant that they truly love anyone who think of friendship as a trade” (Aelred 83).

Second, Carnegie implies that if one follows all the right steps, it is possible to make a lot of friends. Now this may be true of friendships of the useful and pleasurable. After all, when you look at the kind of advice Carnegie has for making people like you—“Remember that a man’s name is to him the sweetest and most important sound in the English language,” “Talk in terms of the other man’s interest,” and “Make the other person feel important” (Carnegie 146)—it is clear that their motivations for liking you exist in the realm of utility and pleasure. They like you because you make them feel good (pleasure) or you massage their ego (utility). You may make lower friendships, but you certainly cannot cultivate a great number of friendships of the virtuous or spiritual friendships, and this ultimately is where Carnegie fails. He does not differentiate among varying types of friendships. Rather, much like Facebook, he includes all of the more-or-less intimate associations between people into the category of “friend.” But Aristotle believed that “[e]ven if one lived in a city populated entirely by perfectly virtuous citizens, the number with whom one could carry on a friendship of the perfect type would be at most a handful” (Kraut). St. Aelred, likewise, thinks that true friendship is rare, since “only those do we call friends to whom we can fearlessly entrust our heart and all its secrets; those, too, who, in turn, are bound to us by the same law of faith and security” (Aelred 58). Sadly, one will not find the kind of language employed by Aristotle or St. Aelred in the pages of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

Third, Carnegie at least implicitly suggests that a person should not go about encouraging others to grow in virtue, but that a person can make people like her by playing rather to their
weaknesses. Aristotle writes that “[m]ost people, because of their ambition, seem to wish to be liked rather than to like, and in view of this most people like flatterers; for a flatterer is a friend in an inferior position, or a man who pretends to be such a friend and to like rather than to be liked” (Aristotle trans. Apostle 150). When the advice that Carnegie gives on how to make people like you is really examined, it seems like all of his points—“Smile,” “Remember that a man’s name is to him the sweetest and most important sound in the English language,” and “Be a good listener” (146)—boil down to this: if a person wants to make people like him, he should appear as if he likes them. Maybe he does, but maybe he does not. Either way, if you follow the simple guidelines, they will undoubtedly like you. Yet, this reduces Carnegie’s friendship into mere flattery. The seventeenth-century French critic and poet Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux famously wrote in his work The Art of Poetry, “Un sot trouve toujours un plus sot qui l’admire.” Translated into English: “a fool always finds a greater fool to admire him” (qtd. in Wikiquote). When one reduces friendship to mere flattery, far indeed is he from the notion that friendship is a means of growth in virtue or sanctification.

Even though it was published in the mid-1930s, How to Win Friends and Influence People has become increasingly popular among people in the twenty-first century. For this reason, it offers invaluable insight into the popular culture’s view of friendship. Friendship is viewed as a commodity, something that can be acquired in large quantities, without much regard for the moral standing of the other. This view of friendship reaches its apex when played out on social media websites.

The Phenomenon of Online Friendship

In this section, the topic of social media will finally be discussed. One might naturally
first ask the question: what is social media? Professors of Marketing Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein take up this question in their article, “Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media.” In this article, they define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build in the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Haenlein and Kaplan 61). Some understanding of the differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 is required here. Web 1.0 included websites like Encyclopedia Britannica Online and personal web pages. The emphasis in Web 1.0 was on making information accessible online, be it objective (as was found on encyclopedias) or subjective (as was found on personal web pages). Web 2.0 is characterized by the presence of “blogs, wikis, and collaborative projects” (61). The emphasis shifted from merely posting information online to more of an ability to share information among different networks of people. Websites that grew out of the Web 2.0 era would include “Wikipedia, YouTube, Facebook, and Second Life” (61), and we might further add Blogger, Twitter, Tumblr, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Flickr, Instagram, Snapchat, Goodreads, Untappd, WordPress, Google+, and a whole host of other websites that unite users together in a social environment. This section, then, will examine two characteristics of friendship as they are experienced on social media platforms: a desire to be known, loved, and accepted; and the friend-wealth aspect of online friendship.

First, it will be helpful to comment on the desire to be known, loved, and accepted. We are social beings (Catechism 1146), and St. Aelred teaches that God has drawn us “together by means of a certain society” (Aelred 62). Indeed, as aforementioned, we live in communities with other people precisely so that we might experience the very blessed life of God, who is himself a community of persons in love. With the advent of the World Wide Web, it would seem natural,
then, that online communities of people would form and that people would communicate and find communion there, also. Pope Francis affirmed this in a recent World Communications Day message when he wrote that “[t]he internet, in particular, offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity” (Francis).\textsuperscript{12} So great would the temptation be to continue to expand horizons and form communities with people with whom you do not live, work, or study that one could sit at her computer in the Pacific Northwest and exchange messages with someone in North Africa or East Asia. This is the idea that fuels social media, and it seems to spring from a desire to be known, loved, and accepted.

This desire, though, cannot ultimately be fulfilled online. When someone signs up for an account on a social media platform, what he is doing is creating an online persona that cannot possibly correspond completely to who he is. It is not and can never be fully him; it is merely a persona. Kaplan and Haenlein state in their article:

\begin{quote}
The key reason why people decide to create a webpage is, for example, the wish to present themselves in cyberspace . . . Usually, such a presentation is done through self-disclosure; that is, the conscious or unconscious revelation of personal information (e.g., thoughts, feelings, likes, dislikes) that is consistent with the image one would like to give. (Haenlein and Kaplan 62)
\end{quote}

People on the internet ultimately present the image that they want to present. Admittedly, this is also true in life, but it seems like intentionally presenting a false image is so much easier to do online than in face-to-face communication. Jack Trotter makes a similar point in an article in the magazine \textit{Chronicles}, when he writes: “I suspect that virtual technology is enabling the emergence of a new kind of self—call it a fragmentary self, a fluid self, a technosocial self, or, to my mind more ominous, a depthless and disembodied self” (Trotter 18). That people are not
entirely honest online is no mere speculation, however. One study conducted at the University of Bath in the United Kingdom found that “[w]hen asked to publicly share information about themselves, . . . participants were willing to disclose more of their private information face-to-face, as compared to disclosing personal information with an online space” (Emanuel 150) and while “[f]urther work is needed to clarify how and why individuals change and adopt different personas as they move between different environments” (151), it is nevertheless clear that they do. Social media makes it easy to disclose a false sense of the self, or at least a self that is fragmented or not wholly true.

Does social media fulfill the desire to be known, loved, and accepted? One study conducted at the Swinburne University of Technology in Australia found that “higher loneliness levels were associated with having more friends on Facebook” (Skues, Williams, and Wise 2417). Are we known, loved, and accepted? A later section will seek to answer this question more substantially, but suffice it to say presently that one signs up for accounts on social media platforms because they are searching for a community that springs from this desire; but the very medium through which they go seeking the fulfillment of these desires cannot by its very nature fulfill them, and they are left instead with “the vacancy of [their] hearts” (Trotter 19).

A second thing that will be helpful in understanding the phenomena of online friendship is the concept of friend-wealth. The term friend-wealth here means the inordinate acquisition of online friends. Since the dawn of social media, the noun “friend” has evolved into the verb “to friend,” which means “to add someone as a friend on a social networking site” (Lee 1036). It is not uncommon for people to say to each other: “Friend me on Facebook!” One study found that on Facebook, “friending constitutes one of the core activities performed by the users . . . providing a foundation for the remarkable growth of the website as an SNS [social networking
site] with more than 800 million active members as of December 2011” (1036). Friending someone assumes nothing about the nature of the friendship, only that two people actually know each other in real life—and admittedly some associations on Facebook do not even assume that much.

This same study wanted to “examine a behavioral tendency which we [the authors of the study] term social compensatory friending – the act of expanding one’s SNS friend connections as a means to compensate for deficiencies in self-worth” (1036), and it noted that while “some argue that the maximum possible number of social connections one can have is no more than 150,” “the number of friends [on Facebook] often goes well beyond hundreds or even thousands” (1037). The conductors of the aforementioned study found “that people with lower levels of self-esteem are more likely to engage in friending” and “that those who are highly concerned about their public self-image are more likely to engage in the act of friending” (1041). Compensatory friending provides two insights. First, it shows that for some people, the online arena becomes a place where they go when they must find acceptance from others to validate their self-worth.

Compensatory friending also leads to the formulation of the term friend-wealth as a component of online friendship. It seems like people are not content with a few good friends; they would rather have many surface-level acquaintances that bear the title friend. Often, this devalues the intimate friendships they do obtain. When I deactivated my Facebook account after my second year of undergraduate studies, my profile bragged over 1,700 friends. Were they all my friends? Certainly not. The majority of them were people I simply knew or had once known. A small percent were family members, most of whom were friendly. The remainder were friendships best characterized as useful and pleasurable. It is worth noting, in hindsight, that not a single association was what I have called a true friendship.
The rapper Prince Ea diagnoses the problem of friend-wealth best in his spoken word “Can We Auto-Correct Humanity?” when he says:

And let me first express first, Mr. Zuckerberg, not to be rude, but you should re-classify Facebook to what it is: an anti-social network. ‘Cause while we may have big friend lists, so many of us are friendless, all alone. ’Cause friendships are more broken than the screens on our very phones. We sit at home on our computers measuring self-worth by numbers of followers and likes, ignoring those who actually love us. (Prince Ea)

Two characteristics of online friendship that have been discussed are an unfulfilled desire to be known, loved, and accepted; and friend-wealth. Is social media an efficient way to cultivate friendship? Before this question is answered, the very notion of cultivation must be addressed.

**Cultivating Friendships**

What is the connotation of cultivation as it relates to friendship? The *Online Etymology Dictionary* indicates that the word “cultivate” comes from the late Latin word *cultivus*, which means “tilled,” and further lists a seventeenth-century figurative sense of the word as “improve by training or education” (*Online Etymology*). When a person tills a field, she prepares it for the crop. The etymological image, then, of friendship cultivation is a preparation of ourselves to receive the other in love and a gradual improvement of the relationship. Much like cultivating a crop, this takes time, effort, and hard work. It would be helpful to return to the writings of Aristotle and St. Aelred for advice on how to cultivate true friendship.

For Aristotle, the cultivation of friendship takes time. Recall that for Aristotle, two friends must be well-disposed toward one another, will the good of the other because of one of
three motives (i.e., utility, pleasure, and virtue), and each be aware of this; furthermore, they should enjoy each other’s company and spend time with each other. Friendships of the useful and pleasurable are imperfect because those “involved have little trust in each other, quarrel frequently, and are ready to break off their association abruptly” (Kraut). Friendships of the virtuous, on the other hand, “require time and familiarity; for, as the proverb says, it is impossible for men to know each other well until ‘they have consumed together much salt’, nor can they accept each other and be friends till each has shown himself dear and trustworthy” (Aristotle, trans. Apostle 144). Aristotle goes on to say that “while a wish for friendship may arise quickly, friendship itself is not formed quickly” (144). Moreover, there must also be some intimacy between persons involved; Aristotle writes that “they must have tested and become accustomed to each other, which is a matter of great difficulty” (Aristotle trans. Peters 168). If you do not know a person intimately, how can you like them because of what they are (i.e., virtuous and good in themselves)? Knowing someone intimately certainly takes time.

For St. Aelred, the cultivation of friendship is envisioned as a kind of process, since “not all are found worthy of it” (Aelred 92), and “friendship should be stable and manifest a certain likeness to eternity, persevering always in affection” (93). In the third book of his treatise on spiritual friendship, St. Aelred writes about “the four stages by which one climbs to the perfection of friendship: the first is selection, the second, probation, the third admission, and the fourth perfect harmony in matters human and divine with charity and benevolence” (93). These stages are unsurprisingly similar to the stages of formation for a monk. Since St. Aelred was the Abbot of Rievaulx, it would make sense that his framework for the cultivation of friendship would have a distinctly monastic character to it. In the stage called selection, a person should find someone with whom he is compatible and with whom he may be able to form a friendship.
St. Aelred says that having an angry temperament would exclude certain people from true friendship, but that this can be overcome so someone can eventually be “considered fitted for friendship” (94). During the stage called probation, a person should grow more deeply in knowledge of and intimacy with the other person as a candidate for friendship. One purpose of this, it seems, is to avoid breaking off an intimate, well-cultivated friendship, which is sometimes necessary: “[t]he necessity of breaking off an intimacy is a painful and unpleasant business, and [St.] Aelred judged that it could usually be avoided by careful testing of acquaintances before admitting them to intimacy” (Roby 27). For St. Aelred, “there were five things which would break the bonds of friendship: insult, attack, arrogance, betrayal of secrets, and a stab in the back” (26). During the second stage called probation, St. Aelred says that four qualities should be tested: “loyalty, right intention, discretion, and patience” (105). These things are not learned after one meeting at the local Starbucks or by quickly glancing through someone’s Facebook profile. They are rather the things about someone that take time to learn, and St. Aelred would further warn against forming intimacies too quickly. He would agree with Aristotle that the cultivation of friendship takes time. Finally, during probation, one should not reveal everything about himself to the other person, but rather “external or little things about which one does not care a great deal whether they be concealed or exposed” (106). After one has tested a candidate for friendship and deemed her worthy of it, he should move on to the third stage, in which he admits them into his friendship. Finally, after growth in intimacy and communion over time, he reaches the final stage called perfection, since he will have arrived at “true, perfect, constant, and eternal friendship; which envy does not corrupt, nor suspicion diminish, nor ambition dissolve; which thus tempted does not yield, thus assailed does not fall; which is perceived to be unyielding though struck by reproaches innumerable and though wounded by injuries manifold”
Having reached this stage, this is when one experiences the eschatological character of friendship most distinctly, for his soul is united with another in a communion of love.

Both Aristotle and St. Aelred are clear: it takes time and an increase in intimacy to cultivate a true friendship. With a solid understanding of cultivation, the initial question can finally be answered: is social media an efficient place to cultivate friendship?

The Question of Social Media

Now with a theory of friendship constructed, this section will address the question of social media. Is social media an effective way to cultivate the true friendships espoused by Aristotle and St. Aelred? This section will concede that there is a proper way to use social media platforms, but it will argue that social media is not an effective means of cultivating true friendships. Finally, it will discuss the potential benefits of deleting one’s online accounts.

Using Social Media Correctly

Is social media is intrinsically evil? No, of course not. In his “Musings on the Internet,” Michael D. O’Brien writes, “The internet is neither good nor evil in itself. Evil cannot be created. No created thing is evil” (O’Brien, “Musings”). Social media has two valid functions in relation to friendship: first, it can be used for the successful cultivation of friendships of the useful and pleasurable; and second, it can be used as an extension of friendships of the virtuous and spiritual friendships. The former function has already been discussed – you are liked for your attributes on social media, which makes it a perfect locale to form and cultivate these types of Aristotelian friendships. It is worth noting that while true friendships are indeed an eschatological sign, there nevertheless is still a legitimate place in one’s life for the lesser types of friendship. Both
Aristotle and St. Aelred are clear: true friendship is admittedly rare. The remainder of one’s friendly associations will necessarily be friendships of the useful and pleasurable.

But social media’s latter function (i.e., social media as an extension of true friendship) means that it is only used after one has formed one of these aforementioned friendships, if ever. When one has already cultivated a true friendship with another person, one now uses social media as another form of communication. It does not take the place of offline relationships, nor does it become the primary locale of encounter with other people. Just as the “[h]ealthy use of technology makes technology a supplement to normal living, whereas unhealthy use makes technology the focus of living and leads to imbalances in one’s life and social skills” (Sayles, ch. 3), so too, in certain ways, can a temperate and prudent use of social media supplement true friendship. This endeavor, though, is ultimately a slippery slope, since what begins as an admittedly moderate use of technology can quickly, tempted by the lure of instantaneous response and ease of use, turn into real imbalances in one’s life and social skills.

The Limits of Social Media

Doubtless, an entire Capstone project could be written solely about the drawbacks and challenges that social media presents to its users, but here, in the context of this discussion of friendship, this section will explore three main limits of social media that cannot adequately accommodate the cultivation of the kind of true friendship that has been discussed.

First, there appears to be a real lack of intimacy between users of social media platforms. True friendship requires intimate knowledge of the other. Aristotelian “friends spend a great deal of time together, developing a secure mutual trust” (Kowalski, ch. 2); and so great should the intimacy between them be, that “[t]heir relationship is fostered by participating in joint ventures
and engaging in activities that exercise their own virtues for the betterment of the other and the friendship. All of this is done primarily for the sake of the other person” (Kowalski, ch. 2).

Likewise, spiritual friendship reaches such heights of intimacy that St. Aelred would feel compelled to write the following: “What, therefore, is more pleasant than so to unite to oneself the spirit of another and of two to form one, that no boasting is thereafter to be feared, no suspicion to be dreaded, no correction of one by the other to cause pain, no praise on the part of one to bring a charge of adulation from the other” (Aelred 72). One can hardly say, however, that relationships cultivated primarily through social media are intimate. On the one hand, it has been shown that people are far more likely to make their online profiles a reflection of a persona they desire to broadcast instead of who they actually are. When someone logs onto a social media site, he does not see people, but personas. He does not see real selves, but virtual selves—“a fragmentary self, a fluid self, a technosocial self” (Trotter 18). On the other hand, a large part of social media is made up of text-based communication. Even if someone one were successful in mirroring her virtual persona with the truth of her person, there would still be a lack of intimacy because when a conversation occurs between two people face-to-face, the words that they say are only a part of how they communicate. The tone with which they say those words and their body language are also important elements in the people understanding each other. Consider the situation in which a text message is misread and how much more accurately the message would have been communicated if they had just said it face-to-face. If one is not able to communicate himself wholly online, he will never reach the level of intimacy necessary to cultivate either a friendship of the virtuous or a spiritual friendship.

Second, people are not liked on social media for what they are, because they are good in themselves; rather, they are liked because of their attributes. For Aristotle, in order for a
friendship to be that of the virtuous and not one of utility or pleasure, a person must be liked because of what they are, namely that he is virtuous and good in himself. Furthermore, each person must be aware of this. For St. Aelred, in order to be a friend, one must “love the soul of another” (Aelred 58) in order to cultivate a spiritual friendship. Facebook is a consummate counterexample of this. A person’s Timeline on Facebook (i.e., his profile, where he can post information about himself, status updates, photographs, videos, links, etc.; and where other people can share similar types of medias with him) is, in general, filled status updates about his day or photographs that he thought were funny or particularly poignant. In response to these things, there are three options: like, comment, or nothing. The like feature can be used in a whole host of circumstances: a person might like an engagement announcement to designate support and well-wishes, a person might like a joke that he thought was humorous, and a person might like a status update about someone’s broken leg indicating her prayers for their recovery.

Similarly, a person can comment in any number of ways – by posting a sentiment of concurrence (“Hear! Hear!”), by arguing voraciously (“Utter dreck!”), or with something completely off-topic, rendering the original poster annoyed. If a like or a comment seems out of place, or if a person just does not care in slightest, he can choose to do nothing. For those, though, who “sit at home on [their] computers measuring self-worth by numbers of followers and likes, ignoring those who actually love” them (Prince Ea), theirs is a futile endeavor. The very features that are so integrally a part of Facebook and other social media platforms reveal the flaw: one is not liked for her own sake; rather, other people are literally liking her attributes—her status messages, her photographs, her videos, her links, etc. Social media, by its very nature, only makes it possible, then, to cultivate friendships of the useful and the pleasurable. What would it look like to truly like another person for his own sake online, and how would that effectively be communicated
Third, social media promotes a pseudo-community that lacks real communion. It was mentioned before that true friendship is an eschatological sign. That means that what is experienced here in this life is a foretaste of what is to come. True friendship, then, is a foretaste of what relationships will be like in eternity. And what is heaven? Heaven is “[t]his perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity – this communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the blessed – is called ‘heaven.’ Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness” (Catechism 1024). We were created for these relationships rooted in love. God made us social beings so that we could share in his blessed life. As a result, we feel a deep longing for communities-in-communion, and we search for them everywhere. We turn to these to fulfill our desire to be known, loved, and accepted. Michael D. O’Brien wonders, though, whether the “fast-paced exchange of voluminous amounts of information, images, and messages” is being mistaken “for an increase of communion? Is basic human loneliness driving us ever deeper into a culture of dislocated virtual relationships that temporarily relieve symptoms but worsen the disease?” and “[d]oes the apparent connection to a global community offered by the internet give us a genuine communion, or does it offer us a dangerously misleading pseudo-communion? Does it disconnect us even as it tells us it is connecting us?” (O’Brien, “Musings”). These are leading questions, of course. O’Brien’s personal position is implied in the questions’ tone. Communication, community, and communion are all derived from the same Latin root, communio, which means “fellowship, mutual participation, a sharing” (Online Etymology). True friendships must enjoy communion. Fr. Jeremy Driscoll, OSB, writes marvelously about the communion that true friends experience, and he is worth quoting again: “When I love friends in
Christ and love them as Christ loved me—willing to lay down my life for them—and those friends know my love in this way and love me in return, then a tremendous circle is created, a communion which is nothing less than communion in the Trinity” (Driscoll 72). Does social media build the kind of community-in-communion that we all so desperately yearn for? Does it build the kind of community that is going to prepare us for the Kingdom of God in time and in eternity? Sr. Colleen McGrane, OSB, proposes that “[w]hile agreeing that we connect in real and meaningful ways online, I would suggest that this can in no way be equated with sitting next to the same person in chapel our entire lives. The first implies distance, the second proximity; the first, little commitment, the second, lifelong commitment; the first, words, the second, many concrete deeds of service” (McGrane 381-82). It is evident that the first is true community in real communion and the second is the kind of pseudo-community about which O’Brien warns.

The Benefits of Unplugging

Though one may be able to use social media as an extension of his true friendships, it has already been mentioned that what may begin as an innocent and moderate use of technology, accelerated by the lure of instantaneous response and ease of use, can quickly turn into an inordinate use of technology. What, if any, are the benefits of unplugging from social media outlets? This section will propose three main ones: removing social media from our lives will result in growth in virtue and an increase in happiness; we will better be able to engage in the New Evangelization as we work to reach out to both lapsed Catholics and non-Catholics; and our spiritual life will necessarily become richer.

The first benefit of unplugging from social media is that we will grow in virtue and become happier. If Aristotle was right when he said that “a life of goodness and happiness
depend[ed] on having certain kinds of relationships” (Wadell 25), and if we will be better at cultivating friendships of the virtuous and spiritual friendships when we deactivate our social media profiles, then we will inevitably grow in virtue and become happier when we unplug. Ultimately, “[w]e cannot know happiness without becoming good, but we cannot acquire the virtues necessary for goodness without friends and substantive moral communities” (Wadell 29). Those substantive moral communities are made up of true friendships. When the intimacy of our friendships increase, our happiness and virtue must also increase.

The second benefit of unplugging from social media is that we will be able to engage more fruitfully in the work of the New Evangelization. What is the New Evangelization? Pope St. John Paul II first used the term in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, in which he describes a situation “where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel. In this case what is needed is a ‘new evangelization’ or a ‘re-evangelization’” (qtd. in Cotter). Unfortunately, this is the situation of today’s Church. As Catholic Christians, we have the mission of re-evangelizing people who were brought up in the Catholic faith but who no longer believe. How exactly does our ability to do this well increase when our online presence decreases? This seems to be counterintuitive, as one may think that in being present online, we will be better able to spread the Gospel. But we must keep this in mind: today’s youth are yearning for relationships that fulfill them, but they are filling themselves with false relationships and starving to death in the process (Vogel). In order to bring healing to our culture, we need to be able to cultivate true friendships that enjoy intimate communion and with the God who is love. If we are not able to do that ourselves, how can we lead the way? As the old adage goes: *nemo potest dare quod non habet* – you cannot give what you do not have. Although it may seem
counterintuitive at first, our efforts to engage in the New Evangelization will actually be more fruitful if by unplugging from social media we learn how to cultivate intimate friendships.

The third benefit of abandoning social media is that our spiritual lives will necessarily become deeper and richer. I once reflected on how our relationship with God is suffering as a result of our presence on social media. At that time, I diagnosed four main problems with using social media: we are becoming more impatient, our relationships are becoming less intimate, we are losing the ability to reflect at length, and we are being robbed of our ability to live fully in the now. These four problems tend to seep over into our spiritual lives. If we are becoming more impatient, then we will not be able to let God answer our prayers in his time and on his terms. If our relationships are less intimate with those around us, then chances are our relationship with our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier will also be less intimate. If we are not able to reflect at length, our meditation—a very important form of Christian prayer—will be short-lived, dry, and fruitless. Finally, if we are not able to live fully in the now, we will be less able to respond to God’s grace, which is available to us precisely in the present moment. Unplugging from social media will not automatically fix all of the aforementioned problems, but it will undoubtedly be a step in the right direction – a step toward intimacy and communion with the God in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

There are real benefits to unplugging from social media outlets – an increase in intimacy and communion and a better ability to develop true friendships. To misquote the nineteenth-century English novelist Jane Austen, it may be possible to do without social media entirely. Instances have been known of young people passing many, many months successively, without being on any social media site of any description, and no material injury accrue either to body or mind (cf. Austen 202). Is abandoning social media entirely the ultimate answer to our
generation’s problems, though? Before that is answered, it might be helpful to recapitulate.

**Conclusion**

My friend Chelsea Kashergen, to whom this Capstone project is dedicated, was somewhat of an oddity among our peers. Other than occasional email correspondence, she had virtually no online presence. She once told me that she would go weeks without turning on her computer, and then when she did, it was for something important. She concerned herself with too many other things in high school to be worried about the minute goings on of the World Wide Web. She was confident, it seemed, that it would continue without her—and it has. Since Chelsea’s untimely passing nearly two years ago, I have often thought about the nature of my friendships and how those friendships are played out and experienced in an online setting.

This Capstone has been the systematic presentation of the fruit of my reflections and ruminations over the past two years. In the first section of this project, I examined the ideal form of true friendship. I took as my guides Aristotle for a study of natural friendship and St. Aelred for a study of spiritual friendship. I observed that spiritual friendship is not the opposite of Aristotle’s friendship of the virtuous, but rather its perfection. Of the different types of friendships, these two—friendship of the virtuous and spiritual friendship—I called true friendship. This segued into a discussion on the contemporary experience of friendship, namely how friendship in the twenty-first century ultimately falls short of the ideal expounded upon by Aristotle and St. Aelred. I examined the method of cultivating true friendship from the writings of both thinkers. Finally, I applied the cultivation of true friendship to the question of social media and concluded that social media is not an effective way to cultivate true friendship for three main reasons: first, there appears to be a real lack of intimacy between users of social
media platforms; second, we are not liked on social media for what we are, but because of our attributes; and third, social media promotes a pseudo-community that lacks real communion. Now that we have acquired all of this information, what should we do with it? If true friendship cannot be cultivated online, what should we do next?

Should we reject social media as an evil and depraved aspect of the internet age? Certainly not. I already wrote about how social media cannot possibly be inherently evil, and Pope Francis wrote that while the drawbacks related to social media “are real, they do not justify rejecting social media; rather, they remind us that communication is ultimately a human rather than technological achievement” (Francis). If wholesale rejection of social media is out of the question, and reckless indulgence is equally imprudent, what is left?

In a word, we need temperance, the “virtue that moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods” (Catechism 1809). Applied to the use of social media, temperance helps us use it in a reasonable way for a realistic amount of time. For some people, this will mean a more moderate use of social media. For others, while not rejecting social media, it will mean that they personally choose not to engage in the online arena. Both responses are acceptable. As social creatures, we need friends. We even need two or three really good friends – people with whom we enjoy intimate communion. However, in order to know what temperance looks like, we need to know ourselves – our strengths and our weaknesses, where we are prone to being tempted, and how we react when we feel rejected and unloved. We have to know what kind of friends we have and what we have to do to perfect those friendships in love.

May Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Divine Friend, abundantly bless the friendships that have begun with his grace, continue with his help, and will reach their perfection in his love. Amen.
Notes

1. The attentive grammarian will note that “social media” should be conjugated with a plural verb (e.g., “Social media are ruining us all.”), as “media” is the plural form of “medium.” My generation, however, does not speak like this. We are more prone to sayings like “The media is biased.” and “Social media is the coolest.” In fact, recognizing the varying differences in use, *Oxford Dictionaries* lists “social media” as both a plural and a singular noun (*Oxford*). Thus, with the hope of better connecting to the generation of twentysomethings, in this Capstone project I will use “social media” as the singular form of “social medias.”

2. Aristotle was born in 384 BC in Greece and is considered one of “the greatest philosophers of all time” (Shields), rivaled only by the ancient philosopher Plato. When Aristotle was seventeen years-old, he studied at Plato’s Academy in Athens, “then a pre-eminent place of learning in the Greek world” (Shields). In his early forties, he moved to the Macedonian capital Pella to tutor “the boy who was eventually to become Alexander the Great” (Shields). Historians do not know the nature of their interaction, *per se*, but Aristotle’s departure from Macedonia was certainly no *accidens*. In 335 BC, Aristotle returned to Athens and set up his own school called the Lyceum. Aristotle was married twice in his life and had several children. He died of natural causes on the island Euboea in 322 BC. His corpus of surviving works is quite substantial, covering everything from literature to philosophy to the natural sciences.

3. St. Aelred (also Ælred, Ailred, Æthelred, and Ethelred) was born in 1110 AD, “the son of one of those married priests of whom many were found in England in the eleventh and twelfth centuries” (Thurston). At an early age, he became friends with the boy who was eventually to become the King of Scotland. When the King wanted to make Aelred bishop, Aelred declined, and instead became a Cistercian monk, entering “the recently founded abbey of Rievaulx in
Yorkshire” (Thurston). After a short stay at an abbey in Revesby, he was elected the abbot of Rievaulx in 1146 AD. He died in 1166 or 1167 AD. His corpus of surviving works includes a number of sermons and ascetical treatises, including his treatise called *Spiritual Friendship*.

4. Of course, a dichotomy between natural friendship and spiritual friendship is not intended, for later it shall be clear that spiritual “friendship is the perfection of false friendships, not their opposite” (Roby 24). In Catholic thought, we also rightly acknowledge that we can do nothing apart from the grace of God, which is why we say that natural friendships can apparently be cultivated by our own human efforts.

5. The use of Lewis’s quote here is meant to show the importance of honesty and transparency in friendship, which is what Lewis meant by the phase “naked personalities.” It does not intend to set up a dichotomy, though. C.S. Lewis was particularly gifted in the way that he used words, but when he said that “[e]ros will have naked bodies” (Lewis, *Four Loves* ch. 3), he certainly did not mean that the only things enjoyed in erotic love are sexual in nature. Any married couple will tell you that the intimacy they enjoy certainly transcends the carnal.

6. Aristotle said that “those who like each other wish each other’s good exactly in the respect in which they like each other” (Aristotle, trans. Apostle 142). Since friends of the virtuous will the other’s good because they are good in themselves, one way to describe Aristotle’s friendship of the virtuous, then, is that two people like each other because of what they are (i.e., virtuous) and not because of one or more of their attributes (e.g., usefulness to us or pleasurableness to us). How, though, can one be liked because of what they are? If I tell you that I like you, you might naturally respond: “Well, what do you like about me?” Robert M. Adams suggests a solution in his essay entitled, “The Problem of Total Devotion.” He writes:

> We seek shared pleasures for the enhancement of our loves—a delicious meal, a
great concert, a beautiful day at the beach or in the woods; or more personally, the joy of conversation or the physical pleasures of sex. Why are these seen as enhancing love? Perhaps at least partly because there is not a sharp line between enjoying something with another person and enjoying the other person. How do we enjoy other people? Most broadly, I suppose, by enjoying our experience of them. In particular, that includes enjoying our relationships with them, which includes enjoying what we do together.

Besides enjoying what we do together, we enjoy other people in our experience of their personal characteristics and what they do individually. We enjoy the sound of their voices, the look or the touch of their bodies. We enjoy their ideas and their feelings, whether explicitly expressed or read by us between the lines. We enjoy the grace of their gestures or the cuteness of their expressions, the wit and style or the candor and intensity of their conversation and letters. In all of this we enjoy the other people themselves: this is the sort of thing we mean when we speak of enjoying another person. (Adams 123-24)

Adams seems to suggest that it is precisely through one’s attributes that we love a person. Our primary love or the emphasis of our love, though, is not directed toward the person’s attributes but toward the person herself. In a friendship of the virtuous, one’s attributes are only a means to an end (i.e., the person herself); whereas in friendships of the useful and pleasurable, the person is a means to an end (i.e., their attributes).

to answer the question: “If love to God is to occupy all our heart and soul and strength, what will be left to love or care about our neighbor?” (108). The author ultimately concludes that love for one’s neighbor can actually “be God’s love for the neighbor . . . at work in us” (129). Thus, “love for one’s neighbor . . . is a fruit of God’s Spirit” (132). St. Aelred himself takes up the question implicitly when he writes that “friendship is a stage bordering upon that perfection which consists in the love and knowledge of God, so that man from being a friend of his fellowman becomes a friend of God” (Aelred 73). It is seen here that true love expressed in friendship never distracts us from God, but always leads back to God who is the source of all love.

8. In his book *Ethics*, the twentieth-century Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer discusses the disunion that man experiences when he feels ashamed. It is worth quoting at length:

   Instead of seeing God man sees himself. ‘Their eyes were opened’ (Gen. 3.7).
   Man perceives himself in his disunion with God and with men. He perceives that he is naked. Lacking the protection, the covering, which God and his fellow-man afforded him, he finds himself laid bare. Hence there arises shame. Shame is man’s ineffaceable recollection of his estrangement from the origin; it is grief for this estrangement, and the powerless longing to return to unity with the origin. Man is ashamed because he has lost something which is essential to his original character, to himself as a whole; he is ashamed of his nakedness. Just as in the fairy-story the tree is ashamed of its lack of adornment, so, too, man is ashamed of the loss of his unity with God and with other men. Shame and remorse are generally mistaken for one another. Man feels remorse when he has been at fault; and he feels shame because he lacks something. Shame is more original than remorse. The peculiar fact that we lower our eyes when a stranger’s eye meets our
gaze is not a sign of remorse for a fault, but a sign of that shame which, when it knows that it is seen, is reminded of something that it lacks, namely, the lost wholeness of life, its own nakedness. To meet a stranger’s gaze directly, as is required, for example, in making a declaration of personal loyalty, is a kind of act of violence, and in love, when the gaze of the other is sought, it is a kind of yearning. In both cases it is the painful endeavor to recover the lost unity by either a conscious and resolute or else a passionate and devoted inward overcoming of shame as a sign of disunion. (Bonhoeffer 20-21)

9. Jesus’ saying on friendship in the Gospel of St. John is rather astounding. It is situated during the Passover feast, “when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father” (John 13:1). Jesus says to his apostles: “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13-15). Here, Jesus is certainly not describing the friendships of utility or pleasure, which fade so quickly when our desires vacillate, but a friendship that is so intimate that each person would be willing to lay down even his own life for the other. This arises from a trusting confidence in the communion of saints, everlasting life, and the non-permanence of this world. One would certainly be hard-pressed to find something in the annals of Aristotelian thought along these same lines.

10. The necessity of the presence of God in spiritual friendship is not simply a trite sentiment or a kind of bubble gum theology that, though it tastes good for a while, must eventually be spit out. Michael D. O’Brien, articulates it best in his novel Sophia House:

All too easily the manipulations of dependence, of familiarity and possession, creep into a relationship. One wishes to draw the beloved close with many harmless and tender strings. How subtly it grows. One must maintain a vigilance
of the heart that is essential to the total gift of the self. No such gift is possible without prayer, for man is not by himself able to master the drive for union and completion. Indeed, I suspect that we are not designed to be our own master. If in marriage it is three who make a union—the bride, the groom, and the Creator—then it must be so for friendship also. Friend or lover, by the gates of your heart there must stand a watchman, and that watchman is Truth. If you ignore his warnings you must surely know that you are choosing. You alone are responsible for what must come to pass: the death of Love. (O’Brien, Sophia House, ch. 13)

Friends need God precisely so that true love can remain love, and not descend into manipulation. Friends need God so that he can bring to perfection the friendship he began in them (cf. Phil 1:6).

11. The maximal love that Jesus showed us on the Cross is foreshadowed by St. John at the commencement of the Last Supper. The Evangelist writes: “Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (emphasis added; John 13:1).

12. The three most recent popes have not been silent on new technologies and the various forms of social medias. Since 1967, popes have been issuing yearly messages on World Communications Day. Pope Francis said last year that the Internet is “something truly good, a gift from God” (Francis). In his 2006 message, Pope Benedict XVI said: “Technological advances in the media have in certain respects conquered time and space, making communication between people, even when separated by vast distances, both instantaneous and direct. This development presents an enormous potential for service of the common good” (Benedict XVI). Pope St. John Paul II also recognizes that “[t]he extraordinary growth of the
communications media and their increased availability has brought exceptional opportunities for enriching the lives not only of individuals, but also of families” (John Paul II, “38th”).

And yet, the pontiffs’ praise of new technology and social media always comes hand-in-hand with a warning. Pope Francis warns:

The speed with which information is communicated exceeds our capacity for reflection and judgement, and this does not make for more balanced and proper forms of self-expression. The variety of opinions being aired can be seen as helpful, but it also enables people to barricade themselves behind sources of information which only confirm their own wishes and ideas, or political and economic interests. The world of communications can help us either to expand our knowledge or to lose our bearings. The desire for digital connectivity can have the effect of isolating us from our neighbours, from those closest to us. We should not overlook the fact that those who for whatever reason lack access to social media run the risk of being left behind. (Francis)

Pope Benedict XVI says that “we are [daily] reminded that immediacy of communication does not necessarily translate into the building of cooperation and communion in society” (Benedict XVI). Pope St. John Paul II also recognizes:

The essence of the Internet in fact is that it provides an almost unending flood of information, much of which passes in a moment. In a culture which feeds on the ephemeral there can easily be a risk of believing that it is facts that matter, rather than values. The Internet offers extensive knowledge, but it does not teach values; and when values are disregarded, our very humanity is demeaned and man easily loses sight of his transcendent dignity. Despite its enormous potential for good,
some of the degrading and damaging ways in which the Internet can be used are already obvious to all, and public authorities surely have a responsibility to guarantee that this marvellous instrument serves the common good and does not become a source of harm. (John Paul II, “36th”)

How are the faithful to understand these statements from the Holy Fathers? Here is one way: the internet is a morally-neutral tool that can be used either for good or for ill. It can be used to evangelize and spread the Gospel, but it can also be used in a gravely immoral way. It is simply neutral. “Even so,” writes Michael D. O’Brien, “we must always consider whether our tools and powers are disposing us toward good or toward evil. Do they make it easier for us to live the good, or more difficult?” (O’Brien, “Musings”)

13. The notion of *communio* is presented in a beautiful dialogue between the characters David Shäfer and Pawel Tarnowski in Michael D. O’Brien’s novel *Sophia House*:

“Spoken language and silence are key.”

“Keys to what?”

“To communion.”

“What do you mean by communion?”

“At-oneness.” (O’Brien, *Sophia House*, ch. 9)

This dialogue presents several insights about *communio*. First, communion implies union between people. Union of what? Of heart, of mind, of will. Take, for example, the status of persons of faith. When someone is in full communion with the Catholic Church, that means that she is united with the Church. This communion is broken when one commits heresy, apostasy, or grave sin. Second, the dialogue shows that communion is found in both speech and silence. Silence is certainly not something that is encouraged by social media platforms.
Works Cited


Web. 27 Nov. 2014.


