

## Sacred Relationship

by Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM

*Depth psychologist and author David Benner has been a great source of wisdom and kindness for me over the years. He highlights how modern forms of friendship rarely become the life-giving relationships that our souls desire:*

The ancients viewed friendship as the crown of life, the fulfillment of all that is most distinctively human. Moderns all too often assess its value primarily in terms of its usefulness for achieving material ends (friends as business contacts) or minimizing boredom and loneliness (friends as people to kill time with). . . .

Most people also have colleagues with whom they work or associates with whom they spend regular time.

But this still falls short of the ideals of friendship. The coin of friendship has been continuously devalued by being applied to these lesser forms of relationship. Relationships between acquaintances or associates involve little of the intimacy, trust, commitment and loyalty of real friendships. Friendships may grow out of these more casual relationships but are not the same. Unfortunately, true friendships are also much more rare.

Friendship is one of God's special gifts to humans. Remarkably, *friendship* is one of the terms God uses to describe the relationship [God] desires with us. Friendship is therefore no ordinary relationship.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the transactional relationships we often settle for today, the twelfth-century Cistercian abbot St. Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167) viewed friendship with other people as a way to deepen our friendship with God in Christ. In his classic work *Spiritual Friendship*, he writes:

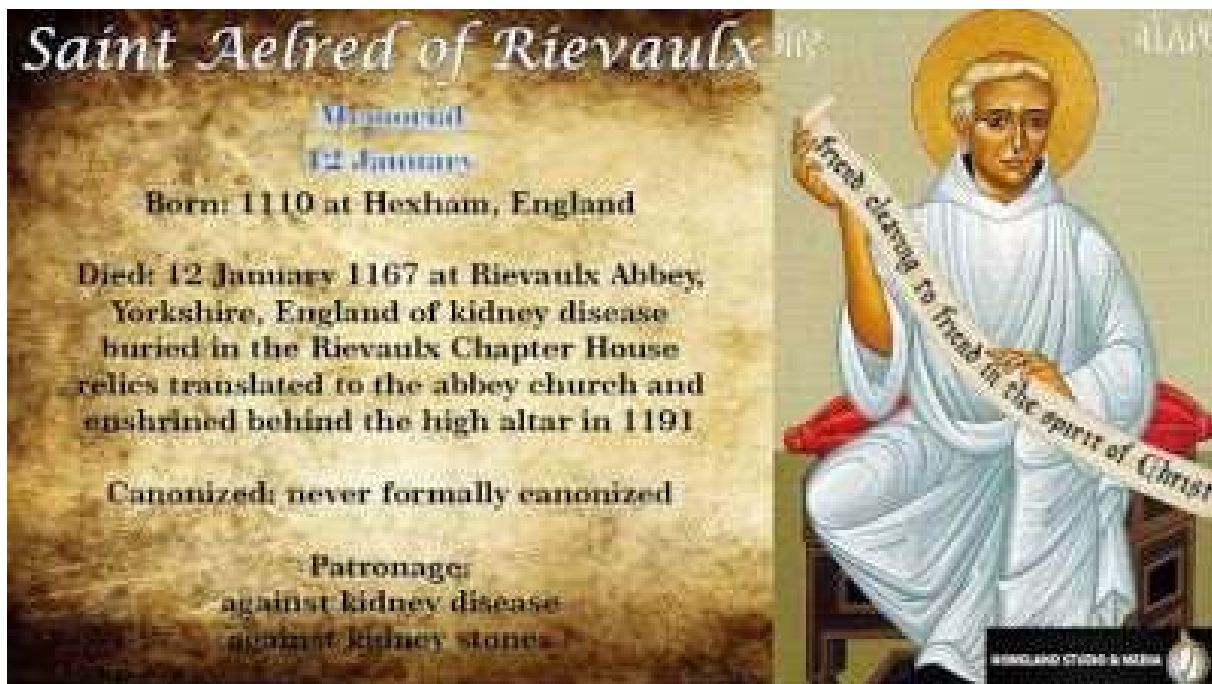
How happy, how carefree, how joyful you are if you have a friend with whom you may talk as freely as with yourself, to whom you neither fear to confess any fault nor blush at revealing any spiritual progress, to whom you may entrust all the secrets of your heart and confide all your plans. And what is more delightful than so to unite spirit to spirit and so *to make one out of two* that there is neither fear of boasting nor dread of suspicion? A friend's correction does not cause pain, and a friend's praise is not considered flattery.

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<sup>1</sup> David G. Benner, *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship & Direction* (IVP Books: 2002), 61–62.

The wise man says, *a friend is medicine for life.*” What a striking metaphor! No remedy is more powerful, effective, and distinctive in everything that fills this life than to have someone to share your every loss with compassion and your every gain with congratulation. Hence shoulder to shoulder, according to Paul, friends carry each other’s burdens [Galatians 6:2]. . . .

Indeed such *great honor, remembrance, praise, and wishes are attached to* friends that their lives are considered worthy of praise and their *deaths precious*. One truth surpasses all these: close to perfection is that level of friendship that consists in the love and knowledge of God, when one who is the friend of another becomes the friend of God, according to the verse of our Savior in the Gospel. *I shall no longer call you servants but friends*” [John 15:15]. <sup>2</sup>



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<sup>2</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Lawrence C. Braceland, ed. Marsha L. Dutton (Liturgical Press: 2010), 72–73, 73–74. Italics in the original.