

July 3: Friendship and the International Day of Cooperatives

Few things are more precious in life than good friends. People who love us, listen to us, allow us to love and listen to them, and who enjoy spending time with us and sharing our interests, are a great gift. As are the people whom we love and to whom we listen.

With friends our relationship goes beyond work and business. We don't pay friends for the time they give to us or for the advice we offer. If we move up the financial ladder we don't leave our friends behind us and look for new friends who can help our career. We don't build our friendships on self-interest, but on care for our friends' wellbeing. We do not possess our friends, trade them in when their use-by date has arrived, sell them out, exploit them, nor buy their time and affection. Friends are a gift, and we relate to them with respect. This means respecting that they, too, are at the centre of their own lives. Their lives are precious independent of their relationship to us, just as our lives do not depend on their friendship. All is gift.

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We rightly think of friendship as personal. But we can also speak, as Pope Francis does, about social friendship in our public life. It is opposed to a view of the world which thinks that in our work and in our business we are individuals who must compete with other individuals, and that in all our dealings we should first of all ask what is in it for us. In this view there is no social friendship in public life but only social rivalries. We do not make friends but alliances when it is in our own interests.

This is a very bleak view of business and politics. Social friendship is based in the conviction that each human being is precious, and that we may not use people to secure our own interests. Our relationships must be based on respect. In our public lives, too, we cannot thrive or even survive if we are always competitors. We have all needed others to bring us into the world, to survive childhood, to educate us, and to invent and produce the electricity and internet we take for granted. Our good fortune and welfare depend on the health and welfare of others in our community. It follows that all relationships between people in society should be governed by concern for one another. When we recognise this we shall want to build a society in which all people flourish, beginning with the most disadvantaged.

Where social friendship flourishes businesses will look to the good of their employees and of society in their planning. Governments will also look to the good of the environment on whose health all human beings and their future depend.

Cooperatives, which are remembered on July 3, offer an enticing view of the possibilities that are created when social friendship is taken seriously. In them employees share ownership and decisions about the company, so that they are involved in management as well as in receiving remuneration. All workers, too, keep an eye out for the good of all others and of their society, and have responsibility for securing it. It is an exacting ideal, but one that can work in practice.

Social friendship is embodied, too, in not for profit organisations like Jesuit Social Services that exist to accompany and serve people who might otherwise be neglected. They are built not on competition but on friendship.