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Religious Life



Good Shepherd Sr. Jean Fernandez, left, takes a walk with a friend to enjoy a bit of nature. (Courtesy of Jean Fernandez)

by The Life Panelists

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Friendship can be one of the most profound ways we encounter the presence of God. Whether through encouragement, laughter or simply walking beside us in life's complexity, some friends sustain our faith when ours seems to crumble, and they remind us we are never alone. Their presence can be sacramental — signs of grace that point us back to God.

This month we asked our panelists: *Are there any friends who make you feel closer to God? What is it about them that makes you feel that way?*



Betty A. Harbison is a newly professed member of the Sisters of Social Service of Los Angeles, a convert to Catholicism, and a retired 38-year veteran English teacher, writer, singer and artist. She holds a bachelor's degree in English and a Master of Science in education from the University of Southern California. She now serves as an education specialist at a shelter for battered and homeless women and their families. She fully embraces the challenge and blessing of working with children and adults in an ever-changing environment. She listens attentively to both parents and children, helping them pursue academic goals and personal excellence, while offering guidance for a fresh start and support in their educational journeys.

People who've helped me feel closer to God are mentors or mentees whose relationships evolved into friendships. Like wildflowers, they reflect great diversity in ages, backgrounds, ethnicities, faith traditions, countries, cultures, languages, temperaments and gifts.

God touches their acts — which I describe as "prayer/share sojourning" — and smiles on our relationships, making them extraordinary. These friends' living is a response to God and a response to others, yielding lifestyles of prayer and support. Consciously and subconsciously, they take God-inspired action to step forward, give feedback, offer advice, make suggestions, and embrace sacrifices. These friends risk self-extension on behalf of others.

They serve as prisms of discovery in my life, revealing my very existence as an interdependent part in God's creation.

Divinely given friendship begets prayer for each other, whether together or apart. We're connected in God's seen and unseen universe, within God's expanse of planes and plans. Time bends, so when I reach out, no matter how "forever" it's been, it feels like only one "yesterday" has passed. Spiritual presence stays with me, even if we are physically separated. I open up my heart and know it rests in safe, confidential hands.

I receive truth in nonjudgmental replies and am challenged to seek and to see truth.

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These friends remind me that "nothing can separate us from the love of God" (Romans: 8:38). That love also holds together my deep friendships with people — mostly women — who are Jewish and Christian, Catholic and Protestant. When our prayers are answered, when we are enveloped by triumphs or tribulations, or when we cross each other's minds across miles, continents, languages, cultures and religions, disagreements don't matter because we are united through belief in the one true God.

We share spiritual and life journeys by speaking truth, listening to each other — deeply, reflectively, respectfully. We love each other by helping however we can, to the best of our ability. We accept our limitations, our boundaries and circumstances, even when they're difficult to bear. We share in person, via technology or by any

means God provides.

Sometimes, thoughts of each other cross our minds or resurface in dreams, nudging us to reach out or offer an instant prayer. It's never surprising when someone responds with, "I was thinking about you," or "I have been praying for you, and I have an idea."

Thank you, God, for friendships that transcend human barriers even into promised eternity! That sojourning lifts me up to you!

"Sweet friendships refresh the soul and awaken ... hearts with joy ... like ... anointing oil that yields the fragrant incense of God's presence" (Proverbs 27:9).



Damaris Muthusi is a member of the Sisters for Christian Community, a trainer and a resource mobilization expert. She consults with faith-based organizations, nongovernmental organizations and community-based organizations on organization sustainability and strategic management. She lectures at Tangaza University in Kenya, teaching organizational management, child safeguarding and protection, social entrepreneurship, development studies, and spirituality for social transformation. She holds a master's degree in social ministry with a focus on organizational management, among other certifications. She is pursuing a doctorate in social transformation, researching community engagement and food security. She also mentors youth and children and is a member of several professional and religious bodies dedicated to societal transformation.

The majority of my friends from different walks of life have made me feel closer to God. However, I want to highlight my parents, Dominic and Lydia, and my best friend, Celestine.

There is something deeply sacred in the manner that my parents live that makes me feel closer to God. It is not so much in what they say, but in the silent consistency of

their relationship and their faith.

Both of them are very special in the way they respond to God. My mother is very involved in church and in all the significant activities and groups, while my father is extremely active in community affairs. This complements their actions toward God and neighbor. Their lives are rooted in prayer — sometimes whispered in the early morning hours or said softly before meals and at bedtime. They do not let anyone leave the compound without blessing them.

Watching them turn to God in both moments of happiness and sorrow has taught me that faith is not just a belief, but a way of being. More than anything, I am touched by their unconditional love. Even when I would stumble or fail while growing up, their arms have always remained open — warm, patient and forgiving. In them, I saw a glimpse of how God must love us: uncompromising and unconditional.



From left: The writer's mother, Lydia Mumbi Muthusi; Sr. Damaris Kathini Muthusi; Celestine Kanini Kyembeni; and the writer's father, Dominic Muthusi Mulindu (Courtesy of Damaris Muthusi)

Their wisdom, too, is like a whisper from God. They guide without directing, offering counsel shaped not just by experience but by spiritual instinct. It is in their quiet service to others, in their insistence on giving even when it pains them, that I see the hands and heart of God at work. They do not cry out from the rooftops, yet their lives resound with testimony.

I have learned from them that closeness to God is not always in the big things. Sometimes, it is in the small acts of love, grace and faithfulness that his presence is revealed in our lives. My parents are a gift of God's love.

My friend Celestine is such a lovely lady who can step back to let things work for me. Celestine's unwavering faith, kind heart, and gentle words remind me of God's love. She is truthful and always corrects in a gentle manner. Her willingness to listen, pray with me and encourage me during times of adversity shows Christ-like compassion.

Being around her makes my own faith grow and makes me want to trust God even more. I feel God's presence and peace through her.

Today, I offer all my friends to God in prayer that they may be always blessed. Amen.



Editruda Mbegu is a member of the Congregation of Our Lady Queen of Africa in Tanzania. Born and raised in Zimba, a small village near Lake Rukwa, she completed her primary education there. During secondary school, she won an essay competition and received recognition from the U.K. Embassy for her writing. She later earned a diploma and a bachelor's degree in education science from the University of Dar es Salaam and a master's degree in biology of conservation from the University of Nairobi, Kenya. A dedicated teacher and natural conservationist, she works as a teacher, counselor and caretaker.

Not all friends make us feel close to God. Friends who do are rare. We should see them as diamonds in our lives because they are both physical and spiritual companions.

I have friends in my life who help me feel closer to God. With them, I spend quiet time in prayer and gratitude, serve others with love, read the Bible and other spiritual books, and listen to and sing church music. All these experiences help me feel closer to God.

These friends don't just keep me from feeling alone, they also help me to strengthen my sense of purpose, belonging and connection to God. In times of sorrow, when they talk to me and offer comfort, I feel no longer alone. Instead, I feel God's tender love embracing me.



Sr. Cecilia Namlamba, left, congratulates Sr. Editruda Mbegu on her silver jubilee at the Sumbawanga motherhouse of the Congregation of Our Lady Queen of Africa in Tanzania. Mbegu credits Namlamba as a friend who helped shape who she is today and who leads her closer to God. (Courtesy of Editruda Mbegu)

In times of joy and success, my friends help me express my gratitude to God through song and shared prayer. When I face a special problem, I sometimes find that praying alone doesn't feel like enough. My friends are my companions in prayer, crying out to God. I have succeeded in my life many times by praying novenas and other prayers with them.

Although they are very few, the friends who help me feel closer to God are true friends indeed! I have to thank them for helping shape who I am. They have supported my personal growth and self-awareness, enabling me to confront my biases, acknowledge my shortcomings, and strive for continuous personal improvement.



Jean Fernandez, a member of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, served as a missionary in the United States for more than 30 years with the Province of Mid-North America. In 2021, she returned to Singapore, where she now ministers within the Singapore-Malaysia province. With a degree in counseling psychology, she focuses on spiritual mentorship and counseling, accompanying individuals on their faith journeys and offering services in mental health. She also serves as a supervisor and educator at Marymount Convent School in Singapore, dedicated to guiding both youth and adults.

In the tapestry of my life, every friend is a thread of God's merciful love, woven with intention, grace and care. I am deeply blessed to be surrounded by friends who, through their quiet witness and faithful presence, draw me ever closer to the heart of God. These friendships are not marked by dramatic gestures, but by simple, sacred moments, real and deeply human, that reveal the face of the Good Shepherd.

First, I think of the women I live with, companions in faith, mission and daily life. Our rhythm of prayer, work and shared laughter creates a sacred space where God is

truly present.

In times of vulnerability, they listen without judgment and respond with compassion. When I grow weary or discouraged, they gently help me return to my center. Through their quiet strength and listening, I glimpse God's tenderness, a love that does not impose, but patiently invites me to deeper trust in God's providence.



Sr. Jean Fernandez, second from left, with Good Shepherd Sisters representing Korea, Malaysia and Singapore, celebrating the gift of global sisterhood (Courtesy of Jean Fernandez)

Beyond this circle, I am grateful for the global sisterhood that surrounds me. As part of an international congregation, I've formed bonds with my sisters and mission partners across the world. Despite cultural differences, we find unity in shared meals, stories and dreams.

In these encounters, I sense the beauty of communion, a foretaste of the church's universality. Our friendships teach me that the kingdom of God is not only built through liturgy and prayer, but also through presence, hospitality and the courageous embrace of difference.

I also treasure my weekly walks with a dear friend. As we move through familiar paths at day's end, we talk about life or simply remain in companionable silence. In these moments, I often sense the nearness of God, as though the Good Shepherd walks quietly beside us. Her calm presence reminds me that walking together relieves tension and nurtures self-care.

Then there is my long-distance friend, with whom I connect weekly over Zoom. Despite time zones and physical absence, our shared prayer and heartfelt conversations have become a sanctuary of trust and grace. These virtual gatherings remind me that God's love knows no boundaries, and neither does spiritual friendship.

Each friend in my life reveals a facet of God's love: merciful, faithful and kind. Their friendship shapes who I am becoming in God. Through them, I am reminded that I am never alone. We walk together, one flock, one Shepherd, always led and drawn by Love.