Having a faith conversation with old and new friends is as easy as setting the table.

FAITH FEEDS GUEST GUIDE
RELATIONSHIPS
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The FAITH FEEDS program is designed for individuals who are hungry for opportunities to talk about their faith with others who share it. Participants gather over coffee or a potluck lunch or dinner, and a host facilitates conversation using the C21 Center’s biannual magazine, C21 Resources.

The FAITH FEEDS GUIDE offers easy, step-by-step instructions for planning, as well as materials to guide the conversation. It’s as simple as deciding to host the gathering wherever your community is found and spreading the word.

All selected articles have been taken from C21 Resources.
Here are four articles to guide your FAITH FEEDS conversation. We suggest that you select two that will work best for your group, and if time permits, add in a third or fourth. In addition to the original article, you will find a relevant quotation, summary, and suggested questions for discussion. We offer these as tools for your use, but feel free to go where the Holy Spirit leads.

This guide’s theme is: Relationships
When I ask about their lives—not just about their academic lives, but about their personal, moral and spiritual lives—what troubles and saddens me more than whether or not they are having sex (though that certainly concerns me, no doubt), is how little sex and sexual intimacy even matters to them. Not only do many of them think that sex is “no big deal,” they usually display little hope that it will ever amount to all that much. They are deeply ambivalent about sex having any significant meaning, and in the context of their mostly ironic culture, they are not going to be duped by grand claims about intimacy, sexual or otherwise. As they say, it’s all “just a thing.” And they have plenty of evidence from their own lives, the lives of their families and friends, and from the wider, sexualized culture to prove it. As I started to really pay attention to what young adults were saying and doing in their hookups, dating and relationships, I detected what I would call a low-level, grinding despair.

That despair was on display in a question posed in a Q & A session following a talk I gave in a residential hall lounge packed full of first year students who were all about 6 months into their first year of college. The student thanked me for my talk on hook up culture and said that she wholly agreed with my critique of it. She went on to say that this was all well and good, but what she really wanted, or needed, to know was how to go about making herself not care while she...
was hooking up and partying. Her voice broke a bit as she asked her question and suddenly the room got really quiet and the question just hung in the air. She silently but openly wept as I responded that I would never, ever want to make it easier for her not to care about another person and or to ask so little for herself. She seemed completely emotionally exhausted. I must admit that though I get questions like this all the time from young adults, each time I am left a little breathless by it.

Many observers find the prevalence of hook-up culture on college campuses to be a signal of the last gasps of traditional courtship and dating. Still others view that conclusion as the “moral panic” of the old and unhip. But what happens when a group of 15 college students find themselves with the unusual assignment of going on a date—no hooking up, no hanging out, no opting out—and reporting back about the strategy, the fear, “the rules,” the ask, the drama, and the A-frame hugs? In this discussion, let’s consider what has really been lost and found in the “case of the lost social script” of college dating.

When I talk about hooking up, dating and relationships now, I do so in all sorts of venues and to all sorts of audiences, from large crowds in auditoriums to small groups in residence hall programs. And for the most part, I talk about it all without ever talking about sex, because I have found that what really concerns young adults—what really scares them, what fascinates them, what moves them—is not really a question of sex but rather a question of intimacy. In the midst of their ubiquitous posting and twittering and snapchatting, despite their seemingly constant connecting through all modes of social media, the students I meet speak overwhelmingly about feeling quite disconnected, lonely and fundamentally not known by others. This strikes me not as the death knell of relationships, or men or sex but as a crisis of intimacy. So what is it then that is missing in the lives of these young adults and how can we help them, and ourselves, find what is lost?

Clearly, intimacy is not an easy notion to understand. It is often only recognized in its absence. While we regularly reduce its meaning to the closeness of a sexual relationship, there’s little doubt that intimacy characterizes other relationships in our lives, those of parents and children, siblings, and good and caring friends. Isn’t intimacy with God what we strive for in our prayer lives? It strikes me as helpful to pose the question: what are we doing when we are being intimate with another person, and why is that being intimate?

Common to all of the intimate relationships in my life is one central and abiding fact: that I have the distinct feeling that I matter to the other person. I find that in those relationships, others who love me—my parents who are my best support, family members who’ve known me through all of the awkward moments of my life, friends who have been with me through bitterly sad and tremendously joyful times—share in my cares and concerns because I matter to them. And I in turn am willing to try to enter into the meanings and values of their lives and take their cares and concerns on as my own, not as facts and data, but as something meaningful and moving, because they matter to me. This may seem overly simplistic, but I have found it helpful in talking to young adults about intimacy because it allows me to ask if they notice the patterns in their different relationships—success and failures alike. Do you feel like you matter to your friends, your roommates, your older sister, your boyfriend or girlfriend? If so, how is that shown to you? Do you know how to show someone else that he truly matters to you? How do you know if you truly matter to him? How would you know? What do you do when it becomes clear that you don’t matter to a person you love? These are sometimes very painful questions to ask and answer. Young adulthood is when most of us first begin to recognize how very much is riding on our closest emotional ties. And it’s a lot. It is also often when we discover how devastatingly precarious some of those emotional ties can be.

As JPII rightly surmised and wrote about beautifully in his Theology of the Body, intimacy involves truly being seen by another. This seems really right to me. It is in the gaze of someone who thinks I truly matter,
who wants to value what I value, who desires what I truly desire, who wants to understand what I mean when I speak and act, that I begin to be recognized and known in the way I really long for. That is the way of love that God wants for us, because it is the way that God loves us. In the lives of young adults, this isn’t easy to come by. Everyone has her own set of needs and worries, and the pace of keeping up and getting ahead means that really stopping and seeing another person or being seen demands so much time and asks perhaps too much of us. But again, intimacy is keenly felt in its absence, and young adults suffer its absence tremendously. What haunts them most is not the dismal job market, not their ballooning student loans, not the skyrocketing cost of living in most major American cities. What haunts them most is not ever being seen, or recognized, or loved by anyone outside of their own family circles. In worse cases, their fear is not mattering to anyone even within those most important first circles. In the very worst cases, there is the darkness of feeling that you do not matter even to God.

When I talk to students about these sorts of fears and desires and ask them to think about what they long for most in their lives, they assume that their desire to be loved and to be truly known by someone else will happen in marriage. While that will be true for most of them, I also ask them to consider the kinds of love and closeness they have in other relationships in their lives. In most cases, young people can identify at least one friend who fits the description of Aristotle’s “Friend of the Good,” the highest and best type of friendship depicted in his Nicomachean Ethics. Aristotle points out that this type of friend sees and loves what is good in me, brings out what is good in me, and wants the best for me. But to truly wish the best for someone, you must know her well enough to identify what is best for her. And that involves knowing and seeing who she really is, not merely who she is for me. To be in a friendship like this activates our ability to be moved by someone else, to allow the meanings of my life to be moved and changed and transformed by someone who wants what is good for me, which is perhaps not fully known to me. Intimacy that is found in friendships like this shows us the best parts of ourselves and bring those parts out into the light. They also build in us a capacity for seeing and being seen, knowing and being known.

I don’t know about you, but even on a good day at Mass when I’m knee-deep in the prayerful rhythm of a liturgy, I get all tangled up in the newly worded response, “I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof.” Because of my entanglement there, I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about it and it seems to me to be about the intimacy we long for with God.

Asking Christ to enter under my roof reminds me that intimacy marks the difference between living next to someone and dwelling with them—letting another person truly enter into my life, to move my cares and concerns and to be moved by his.

When you dwell with someone else—a friend, a spouse, Jesus—your reality becomes a shared reality and you make the horizon of that person’s meanings and values your own. You also let your meanings and values be carried and shaped by someone else. It seems to me that this is the answer to the question, what am I doing when I am being intimate? To the further question, why is that being intimate? Well, when I ask my students about intimacy in their own lives, they usually default to a popular Facebook adage: “it’s complicated.” You’ve got that right.

Kerry Cronin is the Associate Director of the Perspectives Program at Boston College
“The opposite of Loneliness is not Togetherness. It’s Intimacy.”
—Richard Bach

Summary
Boston College Professor Kerry Cronin reflects on the many conversations she’s had with students about dating, the hookup culture, and their hopes for marriage. Ultimately, she’s concluded that students deeply long for intimacy above all else, the experience of being seen, known, and loved. Cronin advises them that they can find intimacy in marriage, but also in authentic friendships, with family members, and above all, in their relationship with God.

Questions for Conversation
1. Cronin says that intimate relationships are characterized by the following sentiment: “that I have a distinct feeling that I matter to the other person.” Which of your relationships would you characterize as intimate?
2. The author notes how technology and social media have connected us to one another in new ways, but also contribute to the absence of intimacy. Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. Would you characterize your relationship with God as intimate? What might you do to even further strengthen that friendship?
This past Thanksgiving break was the dawn of the realization that my relationship with my grandmother could be considered a friendship, because what I treasured most from vacation was simply being with my grandmother, my Yaya. At some point in my middle school education we discussed how our deepest friendships were those in which we could be quiet and enjoy the gift of being with the other person. The more time I spend with Yaya, the more grateful I become not for the adventures I cherished most as a child—trips to the beach, the amusement park, or our beloved local ice cream shop—but simply the gift of time, the gift of being with her. Three saints’ descriptions of friends reveal the beauty of friendship with my Yaya.

“God sends us friends to be our firm support in the whirlpool of struggle. In the company of friends we will find strength to attain our sublime ideal.”
—St. Maximilian Kolbe

I distinctly recall being nine and rushing downstairs to call Yaya, so that she could convince my parents of their obvious unfairness (or, if that failed, to run away and live with her). While Yaya ultimately imparted her wisdom on me (asserting that a ten o’clock departure to fly or walk halfway across the country was not a possibility), even at age nine I knew wholeheartedly that Yaya was my pillar of strength in any whirlpool of struggle. In the later torrents of college decisions, elite academic institutions, and collegiate athletics which challenged my identity, Yaya’s company or conversation imparted almost-immediate peace. To encounter Yaya is to encounter a love so genuine that it mediates God’s love; in a way nothing else can, Yaya’s love grounds me in God’s peace and reconnects me to the strength I need to make God’s sublime ideal my own.
“Love everyone with a deep love based on charity...but form friendships only with those who can share virtuous things with you. The higher the virtues you share and exchange with others, the more perfect your friendship will be.”
—St. Francis de Sales

I have few exemplars of how to love others more ardently than my Yaya. The fruit of a life lived in intentional relationship with the Trinity radiates from her beautiful smile and warm hugs. My relationship with Yaya has always instilled in me a deep admiration of the virtues which bejewel her way of daily life. Grace shines as she patiently welcomes my large family when we inhabit her home for two weeks each summer, as she readies a heart for reconciliation with the briefest of conversations, or as she shares her generosity of spirit through warm hospitality. During our yearly summer vacation, my eight-person family seems to ever-so-subtly become a better version of themselves, especially in Yaya’s presence. The older I become, the more I desire to become like Yaya—to embody God’s love whose fruit is virtue. Yaya’s embodiment of charity serves not only as a model, but as a means to draw me closer to the source of virtue manifest in her life.

“Friendship, as it has been said, consists in a full commitment of the will to another person with a view to that person’s good.”
—St. John Paul II

Few people more sincerely desire my good than Yaya. With unparalleled wisdom and a heart capable of beautifully pure love, Yaya expresses her commitment to my good with gentle honesty and concern about my happiness. Yaya never withholds her honest opinion, which I hold in high esteem. She also cares deeply about my happiness; she never lets me leave without asking if I am happy in my study or work. Even amidst trials, Yaya points out that happiness can be found in perseverance and moments of peace—it is this deep happiness about which she asks, not merely the whimsical happiness that ebbs and flows with life’s peaks and valleys.

Cherished friends bring me joy, calling me by word and example to be a better version of myself—to be who God made me to be. My Yaya embodies holiness, calling me to it with her example and the way she lives, the way she loves; she draws me closer to holiness through our friendship. As Yaya was an English teacher, poetry captures well what her example and our friendship has taught me:

“And we are put on earth a little space, That we may learn to bear the beams of love...”
—William Blake

Megan Heeder earned her Masters in Theological Studies from Boston College’s School of Theology and Ministry.
MY YAYA: MY GRANDMA, MY FRIEND

“How important grandparents are for family life, for passing on the human and religious heritage which is so essential for each and every society!” - Pope Francis

Summary
Megan Heeder reflects on the important role that her grandmother has played in her life, from teaching her how to live Christian charity, to helping her form a solid sense of self-confidence and identity. In looking back on their relationship, Heeder realizes that in addition to their familial connection, they developed an authentic friendship.

Questions for Conversation
1. Describe your relationship with your grandparents. What lessons did they share which had the most impact on your life?
2. What role did your grandparents play in passing the Faith on to you?
3. Heeder notes that in the Christian tradition, real love means willing the good of the other. How did your grandparents demonstrate that goodwill toward you? Were their other adults in your life that prioritized your good?
I am a theologian, so I will not hesitate to put an explicitly theological spin on what marriage has taught me. In short, I am increasingly convinced that my relationship with my wife, and with our children, is the spiritual “place” where I will work out my salvation. Authentic married life, I think, has a salvific character that is not merely psychological or emotional. As a Christian, I believe marriage is a place where I am invited into the dying and rising of Christ. Let me try to explain.

I can recall a period early in our marriage when the salvific nature of marriage impressed itself upon me. At the time our twins were only two months old, I was just completing my doctoral studies. Foolishly, I agreed to teach in a summer program at a university some four hundred miles away. We packed up all of the baby paraphernalia, clothes, books, and my computer, piled into our little Toyola, and headed off to live in a dingy building that appeared to have once been an army barrack. Concrete floors, few windows, and broken-down furniture greeted us as we walked into our apartment.
I was teaching all day, and preparing for my dissertation defense in the evening. Diana was stuck in the apartment with twin infants and no friends or extended family to support her. I would leave at 7:30 in the morning as Diana sat on the couch with two screaming babies in her arms. I would return at 4:30 p.m., to find Diana in the same predicament, if not in the same spot. I had best not describe the glare she would give me. The evenings were spent in petty bickering as Diana pleaded for some well-deserved “time off,” while I complained about needing to prepare for my dissertation defense.

The nights were an endless succession of interruptions as each baby needed to be fed at three-hour intervals. Neither of us slept more than four hours a night. Both of us resented the other if only because we dared not resent the children. Marital “intimacy” was the last thing on our minds as each of us fought off exhaustion. Somewhere during those four weeks the thought began to creep into each of our minds that this whole marriage project might have been a horrible mistake. This is not what we bargained for, or what we stayed up until the wee hours fantasizing about in the heady days of our engagement. There, little more than two years into our marriage, we found ourselves staring into the abyss.

We survived that summer, though to this day I am not sure how. There was no great epiphany or profound experience that constituted the clear turning point. Call it the grace of the sacrament if you like, all I know is that we began working harder to voice our resentments and frustrations. The image that comes to my mind for what began to happen is drawn from a childhood memory of being at the stern of a large river boat, mesmerized by the soothing movement of the paddlewheel churning up the murky river water and propelling the boat upstream. As the vessel approached the dock, the pilot shifted the engine into reverse. The paddlewheel’s steady rhythm diminished, slowly coming to a stop, and then, after a discernible pause, the wheel only gradually and with the utmost effort began to turn in the opposite direction.

That summer we saw a gradual but real reversal in the cycle of our own relations. The pattern of caustic complaints and sarcastic responses slowly gave way to a new pattern of care toward one another. The difficulties did not disappear, but each of us seemed to recognize, beyond our own pain and frustration, the effort the other spouse was putting forth, and that mutual recognition triggered a reversal.

The biblical word for conversion, “metanoia,” means not just a shift in one’s views or opinions but a fundamental change in direction. My marriage, I am convinced, was calling me to such an interior change. I was being called to a life of care and concern for another that seemed beyond my own powers and resources. Salvation is always the work of God and yet Catholicism insists that there is a kind of cooperation in our free response to God’s grace. Put simply, while salvation is always God’s work in us, it often feels like our work as we struggle to dispose ourselves to God’s saving action. In any event, I have become convinced that my “salvation” the spiritual transformation that God wishes to effect in me, transpires within the crucible of my relationship with my wife and children. This interlocking set of commitments that constitutes our family is both burden and blessing, cross and resurrection; it is an invitation to a truly ascetical vocation.

Richard R. Gaillardetz is The Joseph Professor of Catholic Systematic Theology at Boston College.
"Marriage is something so beautiful and so wonderful that we have to look after it, because it is forever."
—Pope Francis

Summary
In this personal reflection, theologian Richard Gaillardetz recalls a difficult chapter in his marriage in which he and his wife were navigating newborn twins and major career decisions. Gaillardetz attributes their mutual ability to see the good in the other and appreciate the effort being put forth to the grace of the sacrament. To him, marriage is the spiritual ‘place’ where he “works out his salvation.”

Questions for Conversation
1. What were your hopes for your marriage at its beginning? How did they change over time and during different seasons?
2. How has grace helped you to live your vows? Where has God been present in your marriage?
3. Gaillardetz says that it’s the little things in marriage - the dying to self for the other in daily life - that make a Christian marriage. How do you and your spouse practice this each day?
THE SINGLE LIFE: WRESTLING WITH THE IN BETWEEN

By Marianne L. Tierney

Hardly a week goes by without various friends on Facebook announcing their engagement or posting recent wedding pictures. I counted 23 weddings that I have attended since 2008 with several more lined up for this year or next. Granted, I know that I am just “in that age” and that this is not necessarily uncommon, but it does indicate to me how people my age are seriously interested in getting married. I place myself in this space too; I’d like to be married someday. But for now, I’m single (as in “not married;” I am actually in a committed relationship but according to my tax filings, I’m “single.”)

For me, the single life right now is about being in between phases of life, and it can be scary. The Church has recommendations about marriage and religious life, but doesn’t actually offer a lot of guidance in terms of navigating the single life. Statistics show that people are waiting until they have chosen careers and set a foundation for themselves before they get married, and couples often try on the idea of living together before marriage. My friends and I have discussed all of these ideas and found that we are often left to discern our paths without church teaching to guide us.

Ultimately, I feel like I am called to be in a committed relationship. I know that there are people who embrace the single life and there are people who live consecrated single lives as well as people who take religious vows, and I respect all of those calls. Those calls are just not mine. But my dedication to a call I think I have has not always been easy. Just because we are called to something does not mean it happens automatically. There have been times in my life when I didn’t know what the future held for me and when I felt incredibly vulnerable. The space of thinking I know what God wants for me and the actual lived reality of it don’t always match up precisely, and that can be daunting and even a little lonely.

I have one friend who talks about how he thinks we all experience God in ways that are different, but consistent. So the way he experiences God may not be the way I experience God, but he experiences God in a way that makes sense to him over time and follows a consistent pattern. I’m not sure I believe in this theory, but when we were discussing it once, I came to the conclusion that the pattern I saw in my life for experiencing God was that I would make
a firm and exacting plan about how things would go and I would think I had things figured out, and then God would say, “Nope. Not like that at all.” This was a frustrating realization.

This in between space of developing myself as an individual and anticipating what I hope to be the fulfillment of a call to get married can get complicated. Don’t get me wrong; being not married can be wonderful. For example, I’ve had 15 different roommates in the last 5 years since being single has allowed me to live in houses or apartments with friends and it has been a blast (most of the time.) I currently live in an apartment by myself and I’ve found that I love that too. These are things I would not have necessarily experienced as a married person.

Friendships are an important part of all of our lives, but for me, my friends are often my dinner companions, my most important conversation partners, and my weekend co-adventurers. Important friends from not only high school and college, but friends who I have known my entire life surround me. This comes from being part of a family that is particularly rooted in a certain place and the fact that I am still living in that place. The time I am able to make for my family is also a huge advantage to currently being single. My relationships with my brother and my sister, for example, are invaluable to me and it is important for me to be able to make time for them. Holidays for me are still spent with my parents, my siblings, my cousins and my grandmother, and since I know that shared holidays are often part of what comes with being married, I’m glad I have had these years with my family.

Despite all of the advantages of being unmarried, I still don’t think that the single life is one to which most people are excited to commit their lives. God created us to be in relationship with one another and it is human nature to want to be intimate with others. So while we are in this in between stage of life where we are discerning what kind of people we are becoming and how we will live with others, what kinds of resources from the tradition can we draw on?

The image of the Trinity is one that I have reflected on for many years and has been helpful for me when thinking about how I want to develop meaningful relationships. I love the communal aspect of the Trinity and the idea that God in God’s very self is modeling a perfect community with not just two but three persons. The agapic love that God displays in God’s very being provides a way to think about entering into intimate relationships that affect more than just two people. My life has meaning and purpose because of the people by whom I am surrounded and with whom I am in relationship. Sure, my work is important to me and I derive joy from doing it, but the people in my life, the people who have formed me into someone who is capable of doing my work, are what really matter to me. Thomas Aquinas says that the ultimate goal of human life is friendship with God and we are only capable of this with God’s help. I see this ideal of friendship with God through a lens of relationality and intimacy with others and I continue to strive for it. Intimacy for the single person can be about a one-on-one relationship between that person and God, but for me, it has been more important to recognize God as being mediated through those around me. My closest friends and my family have helped me understand God’s love in ways that continuously teach me new things.

My life as a currently unmarried woman is very rich and very full. My faith and the tradition I grew up in are important parts of that life. The Church has helped me grow up with a solid foundation and an understanding that God is love, but now that I am an adult, the Church doesn’t have much to give me by way of doctrinal teachings on relationships. My personal faith and my friendships with people who care about me have been some of my best resources I have when thinking about the questions of how to answer a call when it doesn’t seem obvious. As I continue to navigate this in between space I look to images from the tradition to serve as a compass and guide me. I have experienced that God is love and I have grown into someone who is capable of true intimacy. And I look forward to a future where my friendship with God, through intimacy with others, continues to flourish.

Marianne L. Tierney earned her doctorate from the Theology Department at Boston College.
“People are made for happiness. Rightly then, you thirst for happiness. Christ has the answer to this desire of yours. But He asks you to trust Him.”
—Pope Saint John Paul II

Summary
Marianne Tierney tackles a subject not often addressed by Church officials or theologians, but one that is lived by many people: the single life. Though she describes it as a place of being “in between,” Tierney notes that it offers her opportunities to grow in friendship, familial love, and other types of intimacy. For the author, solitude does not equate to loneliness. Instead, it can offer a very real space to encounter God.

Questions for Conversation
1. Tierney notes that the Church doesn’t say a whole lot about the single life. What might a theology of the single life include? Do you know of holy single men and women who might speak to how this state of life or vocation helps to fulfill the mission of the Church?
2. The author describes her state as one of being “in between,” in that she is single but desires to be married. Have you experienced a period of being “in between,” either with relationships, jobs, or states of life? Where did you find God during that time?
3. Do you reach out to single friends in order to build intimacy and friendship? If not, with whom might you start?
GATHERING PRAYER

Be With Us Today
St. Thomas More (1478-1535)

Father in heaven,
you have given us a mind to know you,
a will to serve you,
and a heart to love you.
Be with us today in all that we do,
so that your light may shine out in our lives.
Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

For more information about Faith Feeds, visit bc.edu/c21faithfeeds

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(617)52-0470 • church21@bc.edu • bc.edu/c21