

AUGUSTINE AND FRIENDS

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In my work for the University, I am often asked by parents of prospective students a variation of this question: “what is the difference between a Jesuit education and an Augustinian education”? While I believe I have given a reasonable answer in the past, during the recent Augustinian Spirituality Institute in Rome I heard a different and perhaps more succinct answer. It came from Father Gary McCloskey, an Augustinian of the Villanova Province and somewhat of an expert of the pedagogy of Saint Augustine. Using both a Jesuit and Augustinian “handle” for a response, he said, “While the Jesuits produce a person **for others**, the Augustinians produce a person **with others**”. His answer resonated with me immediately and got me thinking about the role of others for Augustine and how we imitate that not only in our institutions and churches, but also in our personal lives having been touched by the charism of the Augustinians. And so, I propose to address the topic of friends and friendship for Augustine.

As I read about this subject and listened at the Spirituality Institute, some recurring themes emerged. Friends and friendship always played an important part of Augustine’s life before and certainly after his conversion. Outside of prayer and work he was rarely alone. And while we tend to think of conversion in Augustine’s life to have been solely a religious experience, I would suggest that there was also a conversion in the way he saw friendship. Perhaps conversion is too strong a word in this regard. But whether we call it conversion, transformation or simply change, Augustine’s understanding of the role of friendship and friends certainly underwent a development over his lifetime. As I say, it always was an important part of his life but why and how it did indeed change as he changed, as he matured and finally, as he grew in faith is intriguing. I would suggest that his religious conversion had a lot to do with his shift in the understanding of the role of friendship, but the fundamental role and focus of it did not.

Classical Influences

Certainly Augustine was a well educated man. His years in Carthage took a naturally bright young man to a different level. He would have been influenced by many of the Classical thinkers: Euripides, Plato, Aristotle to name a few. Among those influences in particular were Cicero’s, and his thoughts on friendship. “In the *Laelius*, Cicero gives the famous definition of friendship as a relationship based on agreement about all human divine matters, together with goodwill and affection.”¹ Even before Augustine’s conversion, this would have been part of his belief and worldview. Years later, after his conversion and in dialogue with St. Jerome, he would concur that even “the word *amicus / amicitia* (friendship) is derived from *amor* (love) and also speaks of the idea of a friend as a second self”.²

1. White, Carolinne *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992) p 32.

2. Ibid p 142

Caroline White confirms this further when she states, “Augustine...says that Cicero’s famous definition of friendship was absolutely correct and made in a most reverent spirit” 3, and still further of Augustine’s later observation, “ ‘those who believed were of one heart and one soul’ would remind many of the popular, classical expression, one soul in two bodies”⁴ Still later, when indirectly discussing the influence of the Bishop Ambrose on Augustine, and thus Cicero’s influence on Ambrose, she states “that he (Ambrose) does adopt so many of the traditional ideas expressed by Cicero...it is Cicero who provides the fundamental material and whose ideas or expressions are taken over wholesale”.⁵ The influence of Cicero on Augustine will also be seen later in the role of correcting a friend. But we are getting ahead of the story.

Friends Before Conversion

In what might be considered one of the most popular descriptions of the role of friends in his early life, Augustine writes in his *Confessions* as he looks back on the role of friends:

“There were other things done in their company which more completely seized my mind: to talk and to laugh with them; to do friendly acts of service for one another; to read well written books together; sometimes to tell jokes and sometimes to be serious; to disagree at times, but without hard feelings, just as a man does with himself; and keep our many discussions pleasant by the very rarity of such of such differences; to teach things to the others and learn from them; to long impatiently for those who were absent, and to receive with joy those joining us. These and similar expressions, proceeding from the hearts of those who loved and repaid their comrades’ love, by way of countenance, tongue, eyes and a thousand pleasing gestures, were like fuel to set our minds ablaze and to make one out of many.” Book IV 8:13 6

However, after his conversion Augustine would see these earlier friendships, as important as they were, as less than ideal from a Christian perspective. As he looked back, he saw many of these as of evil intent, such as the famous incident with the pears. Also, as he looked back and reflected upon the grief he experienced at the death of unnamed friend which sent him to Carthage. He later regrets its shallowness of faith. As pleasant as these friendships were at the time, they were not ideal. Regarding his school friends, McNamara notes, “these were not friendships in the sense in which he was later to define them...In later years when Augustine

3. White, Carolinne. *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992) p. 50

4. Ibid p 52

5. Ibid p 123

6. Ryan, John K. translator *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York, NY: Image Books, 1960) p101

judged the relationships of his youth, he concluded that they were not friendships in the true sense.”⁷ But there were many. In addition to these there was also Monica, his mother in whom their friendship grew; Nebridius, the brother of his mind, Alypius; the brother of his heart, and others.

Friends After Conversion

After Augustine’s conversion experience in the garden with Alypius, they along with others “retired” to Cassiciacum. White would tell us that “the fact that there was a certain continuity between his attitudes before and after his conversion in 386 is shown both by his continued attachment to such ideas as unity and shared interests, and by his persistence in using the traditional, Classical language related to friendship... most fundamentally Augustine did not cease to use the word *amicitia* in discussing friendships among Christians”.⁸ This certain continuity, yet deeper understanding of friendship, is affirmed by Joseph Lienhard when he writes, in later life, from the writing of the *Confessions* to the end, “he (Augustine) understands that the bond is the gift of the Holy Spirit through grace”.⁹ This is also confirmed by McNamara when she writes:

“In 386 when Augustine embraced the love of God as his only love, his affectionate nature was bound to undergo a profound transformation. This is seen no more clearly than in the complete change in the idea of friendship. His relationship with early school friends had been a companionship that had been empty and sometimes evil. When he saw that this was just an illusion of friendship, he longed for something more satisfying ...he gradually discovered the essential truth: that no true love can exist between friends unless that love is firmly established in Christ and nourished by his love.”¹⁰

We might call this a change of horizon. With his conversion, not just of the soul but also of the mind and heart, his whole worldview or horizon shifts. Because he is a thinker and a person of introspection, he begins to see things differently. We might say deeper than he previously considered.

7. McNamara, OP, Marie Aquinas. *Friendship in St. Augustine*. (Fribourg, Switzerland: The University Press, 1958) pp 37, 43

8. White, Carolinne, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992) p 189

9. Fitzgerald, Allan, editor. *Augustine Through the Ages*. “Meditation on Friendship”. Joseph Lienhard, SJ (Grand Rapids, MI. William Erdmans Publishing Co. 1999) p 372

10. McNamara, OP, Marie Aquinas. *Friendship in St. Augustine*. (Fribourg, Switzerland: The University Press, 1958) p 94

As a result of this resurrected faith of his mother, McNamara notes four fundamental points “that distinguishes it from a pagan notion of friendship:

1. God is the author and giver of friendship
2. Friendship must be stabilized in Him
3. Christian friendship is transfigured by grace
4. Friendship will attain its perfection in heaven.” 11

McNamara further reaffirms this observation by stating, “The only justification for loving the presence of others was that their presence favored the common ‘seeking of Truth, for God himself’”. 12 In the end, perhaps she puts it most succinctly and definitively when she states:

“Augustine has arrived at a definition which may be expressed in these words: friendship is a union between persons who, loving God with their whole hearts souls and minds, and loving each other as themselves, are joined for all eternity to each other and to Christ himself. An additional element is introduced: the everlasting quality of friendship.” 13

However, there are several elements that also need to be mentioned in this context of friendship. First it is important to note that we are not necessarily a community of friends simply by calling ourselves such, or desiring such. Rather we are a community of people striving or working toward friendship. What Augustine provides are the tools toward friendship. This would include avoiding judgments, trying to understand others, patience and perhaps even good example toward others. Of course we are not always successful in this regard. But it is necessary to mention, less one were to develop unreasonable expectations of friendship.

Second, given the role of conversion and development in his ideas of friendship, no doubt Augustine would remind us that conversion in faith is a change that has ramifications in our relationships with others. Again, we are not isolated individuals but called to be **with others**.

Third, it would seem important to note that, while Augustine saw friendship as a means to God, or perhaps more accurate to Christ, and even though there is a strong theological focus to his post-conversion sense of friendship, the connection does not need to be explicit all the time. In other words, I don’t need to be thinking of God every time I encounter my friend(s). It can be, and often is more implicit rather than explicit.

11. McNamara, OP, Marie Aquinas. *Friendship in St. Augustine*. (Fribourg, Switzerland: The University Press, 1958) pp 196, 197

12. Ibid p 199

13. Ibid p 201

Eschatological Element

This adds a whole new dimension to the picture of friendship. “Augustine believed that only in heaven can human relationships be perfect...He thus adds an eschatological perspective.” 14

White goes on to make this point when she states,

“not only does the Christian have the hope of perfect relationships in the life to come, but he can even regard the formation of friendships in this life, imperfect and uncertain though they may be, as a foreshadowing of the true unity and intimacy to come, in so far as they are spiritual relationships in which the friends are united as to their minds which is the best part of them and in so far as the friendships are founded on a shared love of God.” 15

One again we see a recurring theme of unity, not only in this life but also in the life to come; the already and the not yet.

And still further she makes the point by adding:

“Christian friendship does not mean just human companionship and support in this life, but involves true discipleship of Christ and brings with it a foretaste of the knowledge and love of God and of our fellow men (sic), which can only be perfected in the extended community of mutual love which will be the fulfillment of the City of God.” 16

Certainly it is no surprise that Augustine would include this dimension in his understanding of friendship as it was part of his worldview and of the Church and there is, of course, a unity of thought in Augustine. What he would expect, or articulate for all of the Body of Christ, he would include for individuals and their friends. Perhaps for some it might simply be a comforting thought, but for Augustine it was more than that. You might say it was a foretaste of what lay ahead. It was part of his anthropology, his ecclesiology, his Christology. So we see a unity of thought in Augustine that avoids a separation of ideas and preserves the whole of his worldview.

14. White, Carolinne. *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century*. (Cambridge, UK. Cambridge University Press, 1992) p 204

15. Ibid p 206

16. Ibid p 217

Letters

Another intriguing development in Augustine's thought and in particular related to friends, though not relegated to him alone, is the role of letters. Early on in her work, Carolinne White tells us that "letters can provide a substitute for the ideal of living together...although they are in some ways only second best, letters can provide friends with mutual love..."¹⁷ And so we can draw the conclusion that while letters certainly had a utilitarian function of communication for Augustine, there was/is also a greater function – a substitute for being there, being present, in this case, to friends. Many of the letters we read from this period may seem to the modern to be somewhat overdone both in language and imagery. But if we understand them as a substitute for being present we can understand better what we read. Further, White makes the point when talking about the role of unity for Augustine:

"...despite the emphasis on unity, Augustine apparently did not think it necessary for friends to live together or to experience one another's physical presence for this unity to be created. This resulted from the conviction that Christian friendships were spiritual relationships in which the intimacy of the friends derived from the bond created by Christ's love rather than from the sharing of everyday experience. The friend's absence could not, in theory, harm the relationship."¹⁸

Of course the underlying thinking is that physical proximity is no guarantee of unity, let alone love, and vice versa. As we know, letters were of great importance to Augustine. It is unfortunate that letter writing is also somewhat of a lost art for many today. In an age of instant communication and instant access, we often prefer a more immediate instrument of communication.

I remember a dean at the University where I work telling parents at orientation that it was important to write letters to their daughters and sons because they could be kept and read over and over, particularly at difficult times. Of course today, parents are also ever present in the lives of their daughters and sons. Many of the students I know at the University speak with their parents by cell phone several times a day. Perhaps the question of "space" never occurs to either party. I can't help but believe that in the long run, it is not in these students best interest to be so tied in this manner to their parents, but again, that is another story. But his point about the effect of letters can be seen from Augustine's perspective as well. They do more than communicate ideas. They can communicate a presence.

17. White, Carolinne. *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century*. (Cambridge, UK. Cambridge University Press, 1992) p 107

18. Ibid p 20

Fraternal Correction

Yet another characteristic of Augustine's thought can be traced back to the Classical view of friendship and that is fraternal correction. Sister Marie Aquinas states in her text in situating the role of fraternal correction in this way, "Among the duties of friendship which he (Cicero) mentions, special stress is given to the following: friends must always be truthful to one another for flattery and pretense destroys friendship."¹⁹ Once again we see the influence of the Classical thinkers, not only on Augustine's understanding of friendship but also later on the Rule he wrote for his followers; for if these monks were to live as friends in harmony, they must be honest with one another for the benefit of their souls. White also makes this point when she refers to a series of letters exchanged between Augustine and Jerome after Jerome had taken exception to a perceived critique by Augustine. In Ep. 28 Augustine writes, and she quotes, "'Stronger is the love of the salutary rebuke than that of the flatterer pouring oil on the head'. The theme of the friendly rebuke occurs again in Ep. 73.2.4."²⁰ Fraternal correction seems to have been a value from the Classical thinkers and Augustine sees its value for all true relationships.

Augustine and Friends Today

At the very least, Augustine would tell us that friends can lead us to Christ. In a course such as ours on Augustinian Spirituality, we are reminded that we, like Augustine, are on a journey, a journey to God. We typically understand this to be a call to holiness. That call is both to self and others. Not only from a Christian perspective, but also, and particularly from an Augustinian perspective that journey to holiness is not done alone. Just as Augustine leads us to Christ, so too can we lead others to Christ and are called to do so. No doubt Augustine would have us see friendship as a certain "sacrament" of God, in the broadest sense of that word. And that union with God, through others is perhaps the most fulfilling. He would probably tell us that there is no rivalry between love of God and love of others. In fact, he would probably tell us that Agape, self-giving love, is the highest form of love to which we can aspire both as humans and as Christians in journey toward God. Yet, it seems strange that in a world so desperate for friendship (note the popularity of "friends" on Facebook) that we seem to have lost a true sense of friendship. The Classical writers and Augustine himself offers us a critique of the lost value of friendship, at many levels. Michael Himes tells us, "All friendships are healthy so long as we recognize that these relationships are a partial experience of the Absolute Love which is God."²¹

19. McNamara, OP, Marie Aquinas. *Friendship in St. Augustine*. (Fribourg, Switzerland: The University Press, 1958) pp 5,6

20. White, Carolinne. *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992) p 193

21. Himes, Michael, et al. *Doing the Truth in Love: Conversations About God, Relationships and Service*. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995) p 40

As we look around the world in which we live, as well as the Church to which we belong, we see some painful realities which recently seem to have become more problematic rather than less. Though we would hope and expect a certain continuing development of ideas like Augustine's, one would wonder about things such as friendship, among others. As we crave friendship and belonging, we seem to be ever more alone and separated. As a culture, it would seem that we have retreated into ourselves with iPads and iPods replacing true human interaction and, in the end, true and life-giving friendship. Walk around the campus where I work and this becomes painfully apparent. One wonders what are some of the factors that have created this vacuum.

First of all, it occurs to me that perhaps friendship is too easy a concept about which to talk. Yet, it requires work. As in many other areas of the world in which we live, it is too facile a word about which to speak, yet altogether difficult to accomplish. Is it a lack of awareness, a lack of effort, or just a lack of will?

Secondly, and taking Augustine's experience and reflection as a guide, perhaps before religious conversion, friendship itself can be a substitute for God. We can make an idol of almost anything, including friendship. Certainly Augustine reminds us that God is an essential component of true friendship, and even with God it is a difficult value to achieve since we deal with so many different understandings and conflicting expectations of it.

Thirdly, in order to have a friend we need to be a friend. That means values and ideals that foster true friendship need to be ours. Do we have models of these to which we are called to aspire? Or do we live in such a superficial world that values and ideals that sustain us through all the vicissitudes of life never even occur to us? Are we aware of these and the role that they play in life?

And of course, fourthly, it requires effort. If there are not examples of such, is it all too easy to ignore the process and live in a world of our own, often not even realizing the incompleteness of life without friends and God?

Finally, though certainly not exhaustively, are we afraid of being vulnerable such that friendship can indeed occur? Have so many of us become so inured by life's problems, both personally and collectively, that we are afraid to reach out to others and be for them the way to God?

These are some of the questions or issues that occur to me as I examine the role of friendship in the world in which I live, a world rich in so many ways other than the ways that lead to peace and true fulfillment.

But I would suggest that the conversation not necessarily end there. I believe that an Augustinian worldview offers not only new possibilities, but also hope for a malaise that seems to thrive just below the surface. In other words, this is what I think an Augustinian worldview can offer, perhaps not uniquely, but certainly most profoundly.

Some Solutions

In his journal dated September 15, 1900, Rene Maria Rilke wrote, “Friends do not prevent our solitude, they only limit our aloneness”. In a world so desperately alone, friends offer us this comforting perspective.

Second, true friends offer a model and a value of friendship that, as I say, may have become a forgotten value in a fast paced and frenetic world. As such, perhaps they can bring out the best in us that perhaps we would never be able to do on our own. Again, a certain richness in perspective.

Third: in a society and even a Church where trust is not often perceived, friends can bring us to a place where the unfolding of the individual is of primary importance and nothing, absolutely nothing would come before that goal. Radical trust that frees one to become that being we are called to be can only be revealed in this milieu. Friends and friendship offers that force field.

Fourth, and most especially, friends assist us not only on the journey of life but also the journey to God. Friends can help us to not only know God, but also to know ourselves as part of God’s creation and the being in Christ we are called to be by Baptism. In addition and eventually, becoming

“one soul involves profound intimacy with Christ...Augustine believed that this unity, though never to be perfectly realized in this life, comes closest to perfection in the monastic life which offers an original and profound form of the ideal of friendship as worked out in the theories of Classical writers discussing the problems of human relationships. Augustine’s attraction to friendship and his early ideas on the subject seem to have attained a deeper significance in the context of the Christian’s imitation of the apostolic community at Jerusalem and of Christ’s love for man...” 22

Of course, while the monastic life might be the ideal, certainly not all are called to it. Augustine takes a broader view of monastic, “monos”, not as alone but as one. Certainly we can, and as Christians should, strive to be one just as the apostolic community left us as an ideal. We are all called to that perspective as well. Recall the earlier quote from the *Confessions* where, even before his conversion Augustine saw the role of friends “to make one out of many”. 23

These are indeed ideals toward which we are all called. Yet we are called as Christians to live this ideal and invited to call others to the same experience of completeness.

22. White, Carolinne. *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Press, 1992) p 217

23. Op cit

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper I noted that while friends always played an important role in Augustine's life, his understanding of it did in fact change as he changed. We might call that development, we might call that conversion. But as I raised the questions of why and how did his understanding of friendship changed, I offer these final thoughts.

At least three things affected Augustine's developing ideas on friends and friendship. Certainly, as mentioned, his own conversion affected his worldview in its entirety and at every level. Augustine also possessed two characteristics which may have assisted in this process. He had a natural affection, no doubt inherited from his Berber father. But he was also introspective by nature and many of the changes he was experiencing at other levels would also cause him to reflect on the role of friendship more deeply as well.

How it changed is perhaps not so distinct from the why of the above. His conversion took him to yet another dimension and that development was at every level: intellectual, spiritual, interpersonal, moral. Again, his horizons changed and deepened with this experience that was to affect him deeply and for the rest of his life.

In a sense, we who reflect on Augustine and the meaning of his life for us personally, particularly those of us who have been influenced by his powerful story and example and the imprint of that which our churches and institutions try to continue, can be grateful for many of his thoughts, not the least of which are Augustine's thought on friends.

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