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"THE FRIEND OF THE BRIDEGROOM STANDS AND LISTENS" AN ANALYSIS OF THE TERM *AMICUS SPONSI* IN AUGUSTINE'S ACCOUNT OF DIVINE FRIENDSHIP AND THE MINISTRY OF BISHOPS

The Gospel of John refers to John the Baptist as the "friend of the bridegroom" (Jo. 3, 29). During his conflicts with the Donatists, Augustine became especially interested in this title. He began to employ it not only in reference to John the Baptist, but also as a description of the ideal Catholic bishop. Augustine had already in earlier works drawn upon biblical images to describe the Christian life as a call become "the friends of God". In his exchanges with the Donatists, however, Augustine begins to argue that the pastor of God's people is uniquely called to be a "friend of the bridegroom". A number of excellent studies have given attention to Augustine's general theory of friendship.¹ These studies, however, neglect

¹ See for example, D. X. Burt, *Friendship and the State*, in *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum*, ed. by J. T. Lienhard, New York 1993, pp. 249-261; E. Cassidy, *Friendship and Beauty in Augustine*, in *At the Heart of the Real*, Dublin 1992, pp. 51-66, and *The Recovery of the Classical Ideal of Friendship in Augustine's Portrayal of Caritas*, in *The Relationship Between Neoplatonism and Christianity*, ed. by T. Finan and V. Twoney, Dublin 1992, pp. 127-140; C. White, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century*, New York 1992; James A. Mohler, *Late Have I Loved You: An Interpretation of Saint Augustine On Human and Divine Relationships*, New York 1991; J. T. Lienhard, *Friendship in Paulinus of Nola and Augustine*, in *Collectanea Augustiniana*, ed. by B. Bruning et al., Louvain 1990, pp. 279-296; B. McGuire, *Friendship and Community, the Monastic Experience, 350-1250*, Kalamazoo MI 1988; J. McEvoy, *Anima una et cor unum: Friendship and Spiritual Unity in Augustine*, in *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale* 53 (1986), pp. 40-92; T.J. Van Bavel, *Christians in the World: in Introduction to the Spirituality of Augustine*, New York 1980; A. Sage, *La contemplation dans les communautés de vie fraternelle*, in *Recherches Augustiniennes* 7 (1971), pp. 246-302; M. A. McNamara, *Friends and Friendship for Saint*

Augustine's conception of the Christian call to be a friend of God.² In addition, they leave the specific significance of Augustine's presentation of friendship with the bridegroom virtually unexplored. In the pages that follow, I will outline Augustine's use of the title "friend of the bridegroom". This analysis will reveal that, for Augustine, *amicus sponsi* is much more than simply an honorific title. Augustine discovers in it a helpful model for understanding the Christian pastor's vocation to care for Christ's flock. The context in which the phrase appears in John's Gospel, allows Augustine to use this model as a powerful critique of the Donatist view of Christian ministry. To understand how this is possible, it will be helpful first to analyze Augustine's general position concerning friendship with God.

1. Friendship with God

When one analyzes the ensemble of passages in which Augustine uses the term friend of God, one discovers a coherent and developed conception of what it means to be God's friend. In book eleven of the *City of God*, Augustine is confronted with a critique of the biblical account of creation: how are the Scriptures able to describe how the world was created, since the "prophet" who wrote the account could not have been there? Augustine finds a solution to this problem in a verse from the book of Wisdom which states that the prophets are God's friends. Augustine explains that at the moment of creation,

the Wisdom of God was there, and it was through that Wisdom that all things were made; and that Wisdom 'passes also into holy souls and makes them friends of God and prophets', and tells them inwardly and soundlessly, the story of God's works.³

Augustine, New York 1964.

² John Burnaby in *Amor Dei* goes so far as to assert that Augustine "scarcely ever speaks of a 'friendship' with God," and implies in the footnote that Augustine uses the term only once in an early work. See J. Burnaby, *Amor Dei, a Study of the Religion of St. Augustine*, London 1938, pp. 256-257. As we shall see, the textual evidence does not support this claim.

³ *De Civitate Dei* 11,4, PL 41,319.9; translated by J. O'Meara, London 1972. The biblical citation is from *Sap.* 7,27. Augustine also alludes in this passage to *Proverbs* 8, 27. See, in addition, *De Trinitate* 4,20, PL 42,907.14, where he takes up this same theme.

The force of Augustine's argument rests upon the conception of friendship that it implies. Educated Roman culture took it for granted that friends shared with each other their thoughts and secrets, their past and their plans for the future. For example, in the *De Amicitia*, Cicero has Laelius exclaim, "what is sweeter than to have someone with whom you may dare discuss anything as if you were communing with yourself?"⁴ Thus, the prophet knows "the story of God's works", because the prophets are "friends of God".⁵

Augustine views the process by which one becomes the friend of God as a response to a call. The model of this response is Abraham. God called Abraham and "Abraham believed and it was reckoned to him as justice, and he was called a friend of God" (*Iac.* 2,23). Augustine is quick to add that this faith-filled response to God is offered in the context of a holy life filled with works of love. A friend of God is one who has "faith which works through love" (*Gal.* 5,6).⁶ Thus, Augustine will elsewhere proclaim that,

no one becomes a friend of God except by the most pure conduct and by that goal of the commandment about which the Apostle speaks, 'the goal of the commandment is charity from a pure heart, and a good conscience and a unfeigned faith' (*1 Tim.* 1,5).⁷

In a similar context, Augustine reveals his belief in the universal-

⁴ *De Amicitia* VI,22. Throughout this essay, the translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.

⁵ Augustine offered a similar argument some twenty years earlier. When the Manichees challenge him to explain why God willed to create heaven and earth, Augustine responds by employing the analogy of friendship. "If anyone wishes to know the will of God, let him become a friend of God. For, if anyone wanted to know the will of a man of whom he was not a friend, everyone would deride his impudence and stupidity" (*De Genesi contra Manichaeos* 1,2, PL 34,175.53). The Manichees are not God's friends; if they were his friends they would understand his will. Augustine explains, however, that they cannot become his friends until they change their way of living. Their immoral lives have clouded their minds to the truth. See also *De diversis Quaestionibus Octoginta Tribus* 68, PL 40,71.20.

⁶ See *Sermon* 2,9, PL 38,32.8. The edition of Augustine's Sermons consulted throughout this essay is that prepared by Edmund Hill for the Augustine Heritage Institute, [The Works of Saint Augustine: a Translation for the 21st Century 3, 1-10], New York 1990-1994. All quotations of Augustine's sermons throughout this essay are from Hill's translation.

⁷ *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* 1,2, PL 34,175.56.

ity of this call. All people, not just the patriarchs and prophets, are called to become the friends of God. In his reflections in *Faith and the Creed*, Augustine explains that through the gift of the Holy Spirit "we are no longer 'under fear, like servants' (*Rom.* 8,15), because 'love, when it is made perfect, casts out fear' (*1 Io.* 4, 18)".⁸ Instead, we have become the friends of God. Here too Augustine emphasizes what, for him, is a principal effect of divine friendship: we begin to know and understand the hidden things of God.

And since we have been reconciled and called back into friendship through charity, we shall be able to become acquainted with all the secret things of God, and for this reason it is said of the Holy Spirit that 'he shall lead you into all truth' (*Io.* 16,13).⁹

Augustine elsewhere explains that as friends of God, this union of knowledge also implies a union of wills. The friends of God hate what he hates and love what he loves.¹⁰

Augustine, drawing upon Paul's *Letter to the Romans* (5, 10), describes the process of becoming a friend of God as a movement away from enmity with God. Through a work of grace, those who were once enemies (*inimici*) of God become his friends (*amici*).¹¹ The *Letter of James* provides Augustine with a further refinement of this motif. The movement from enmity to friendship is more truly a movement from one type of friendship to another: "Do you not know

⁸ *De fide et symbolo* 9,19, PL 40,191.53; translated by S. D. F. Salmond, [Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church 3], New York 1887.

⁹ *Ibid.*, PL 40,191.56. Also, commenting upon Psalm 93, Augustine states, "et homines scierunt cogitationes dei; sed quibus iam amicus factus est, prodit consilium suum" (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 93,14, PL 37,1202.44). Augustine presents a poignant practical application of this belief in a homily to his people on the feast of saints Peter and Paul shortly after the fall of Rome (*Sermon* 296, PL 38,1352.50).

¹⁰ *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 44, PL 36,504.45: "eris enim deo amicus, si odisti quod odit. ita et amabis quod amat." This is a view of friendship present in Cicero, who defines friendship as "nihil aliud, nisi omnium divinarum humanarumque rerum cum benivolentia et caritate consensio" (*De Amicitia* VI,20). Augustine is here applying this Ciceronian insight to our friendship with God.

¹¹ *Epistola* 217, PL 33,983.2. See also *De catechizandis rudibus* 7, PL 40,318.37.

that friendship with the world is enmity with God?" (*Iac.* 4,4).¹² For Augustine, friendship with the world is akin to friendship with the demons, under whose power the world is subjected. For example, in the *City of God*, Augustine describes the pagan priest Pompilius as a friend of the demons.¹³ As with true friendship, the demons reveal their secrets to their friends. In reality, however, the demons are "false friends", because they seek only to harm their friends.¹⁴ This was the sorry plight of the philosophers. They thought that "the gods were their friends", but in fact they had fallen into relationship with "malignant demons".¹⁵ The result was that they were degraded and ultimately led to their destruction.¹⁶ Right relationship with God, on the other hand, ennobles the individual and draws him into the peaceful kingdom of the heavenly city.¹⁷ In the *Confessions*, Augustine relates how this insight led two imperial officials to forsake the world and become friends of God. These two stumbled upon a biography of St. Anthony and started to read it aloud.

Suddenly the man who was doing the reading was filled with a love of holiness and angry at himself with righteous shame. He looked at his friend and said to him: "Tell me, please, what is the goal of our ambition in all these labours of ours? What are we aiming at? What is our motive in being in the public service? Have we any higher hope at court than to be friends of the emperor? And at that level, is not everything uncertain and full of perils? And how many perils must we meet on the way to this greater peril? And how long before we are there? But if I should choose to be a friend of God, I can become one now."¹⁸

Augustine relates that this official was "changed inwardly". He resigns from imperial service, convinces his friend to do the same,

¹² *Sermon* 142, PL 38,779.18, and 162, PL 38,887.56; *De baptismo* 4,2, PL 43,155.45.

¹³ *De Civitate Dei* 7,35, PL 41,224.18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 19,9, PL 41,636.7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 19,9, PL 41,636.14.

¹⁶ Elsewhere Augustine says of the Donatists, "quid enim nisi inimici christi, amici autem diaboli, discipuli seductoris, condiscipuli traditoris? spontaneas enim mortes ab uno magistro utrique didicerunt, ille laqueum, isti praecipitium" (*Contra litteras Petiliani* 2,49, PL 43,299.53).

¹⁷ *Ibid.* *De Civitate Dei* 19,11, PL 41,637.

¹⁸ *Confessions* 8,6, PL 32,756.2; translated by Frank Sheed, New York 1942. See also *En. in Psalmos* 131, PL 37,1718.46-57.

and they both dedicate themselves in poverty to the service of God. Friendship with the emperor is full of perils and can only be acquired through long and arduous effort. Friendship with God, on the other hand, is acquired in an instant, in a faith filled response to God's grace. Left unaided, such intimacy with God would be impossible. Yet, God's grace opens up possibilities to the Christian that he would not otherwise have.¹⁹

Nevertheless, in Augustine's view, friendship with God can never be perfect in this life. Thus, Adam, when he was converted back to the Lord, became a "friend of God", but only "to the extent that this is possible before the death of the body".²⁰ In this life, not only do we never see God fully as he is in himself, we also are always able to betray our friend. Only the saints in heaven are fully God's friends, enjoying his friendship in an intimacy that is greater than any earthly union.

We should note that, for Augustine, one becomes the friend of God through Christ. It is Christ who loved the sinner "when he was an enemy, in order that He might justify him and make him a friend".²¹ It is Christ who sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts and makes us his friends.²² It is Christ who draws us from servitude to friendship.²³ It is Christ who reveals the hidden things of God to

¹⁹ *Sermon 335H.2*, PLS 2,831.14.

²⁰ *De diversis questionibus octoginta tribus* 30, PL 40, 20.31.

²¹ *De catechizandis rudibus* 7, PL 40,318.37. See also *Sermon 317*, PL 38,1435.47.

²² *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 92, PL 35,1864.34.

²³ *Ibid.* 85, PL 35,1848.35. Augustine is troubled by Christ's statement that "I no longer call you servants, but friends". Augustine is fully aware that scripture also describes the saints as servants of God. They are servants who, as friends, are servants no more, and yet somehow also still remain servants. After approaching this problem from several angles without a resolution, Augustine states, concerning the verse which is the heart of the passage (*Jo. 15,15b*) that it "is so profound that in no way can it be crowded into this sermon, but it must be put off to another" (PL 35,1850.12). This said, however, in the next sermon he shifts the emphasis away from explaining the significance of the title "friend" to a consideration of what it is that Christ has revealed from the Father. As late as A.D. 425 Augustine could proclaim from the pulpit, "Stephen, from being a servant, became a friend. We for our part are undoubtedly servants; may Christ grant that we also may be friends" (*Sermon 316*, PL 38,1431.52).

us;²⁴ and it is as friends of Christ that the martyrs go joyfully to their deaths.²⁵ As we shall discover, however, Augustine usually reserves the title "friend of the bridegroom" for only to a chosen few.

Before beginning our analysis of this term it will be helpful to review. In Augustine's view the prophets and patriarchs are the friends of God. As God's friends, they know his plans and the hidden things of his heart. Divine friendship begins with God's call but entails a response of faith exhibited through a holy life in works of love. Abraham is the embodiment of this faithful and loving response. In Christ, God now offers his friendship to all people. Like the patriarchs and prophets of old, the Christian, as a friend of God, comes to know the hidden things of God. In a union of knowledge and love, God begins to share his secrets with his friends; moreover, they begin to hate what he hates and to love what he loves. This divine friendship is safer and surer than any other friendship. Yet, it reaches its perfection only in heaven.

2. *The Friend of the Bridegroom*

2.1. *The Donatist Context*

It was in his controversies with the Donatists that Augustine was led to refine his understanding of divine friendship. The Donatists were arguing that the baptism offered by those who had lapsed during the persecution was not life-giving and thus those baptized by unfaithful ministers should be rebaptized. They should come to the Donatist bishops, to those who had not lapsed in the persecution, and be baptized by the true "friends of God".²⁶ In defense of this

²⁴ *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 85, PL 35,1848.35.

²⁵ See *Sermons 315, 316, 317, 332, 335H*. In Augustine's view, Stephen is the embodiment of friendship with Christ. He became a friend of Christ because, in the gift of grace, he imitated Christ's example: he laid down his life for his friends. Indeed, like Christ, Stephen laid down his life for them while they were still his enemies. Yet, like Christ, the forgiveness that Stephen offers them at the moment of his death changes at least one of them. Saul, his enemy, will soon become his friend. See *Sermons 316,3*, PL 38,1433.52, and 317,6, PL 38,1435.

²⁶ Secundinus of Cadius, as recorded in the acts of the Council of Carthage (*Conc. Carth. sec 2*), states, "without all doubt the enemies of Christ, and those who are called anti-christs, cannot minister the grace of the baptism which gives salvation; and therefore my judgment is that those

view they appealed to a venerable North African tradition that went all the way back to St. Cyprian. Indeed, from Augustine's own argument that the immoral lives of the Manichees prevent them from being friends of God, one might easily conclude that, therefore, they cannot validly baptize.²⁷ This, it seems, led Augustine to refine his conception of divine friendship. Within the universal Christian call to become the friends of God, Augustine detects a particular call made to the bishops of the Church to become the friends of the bridegroom.

The choice of spousal imagery is tactically important because Cyprian had employed it in defending the practice of rebaptism. The Church is the "spouse of Christ". Thus, one who "breaks with the Church" enters into "an adulterous union", and "cuts himself off from the promises made to the Church".²⁸ Cyprian argues that since "she alone has the power to baptize", heretical ministers do not have the power to baptize, and thus those who are baptized by them must be rebaptized.²⁹

Firmilian, a friend and contemporary of Cyprian's, in approving of Cyprian's views, restates them in a way that seems to have influenced Augustine and the later debate.

The second birth which is baptism, gives birth to children of God. But if the bride of Christ, that is to say, the Catholic Church, is one, then she alone is the one who gives birth to children of God. For Christ does not have a number of brides, as the Apostle says: 'I have betrothed you to Christ as a chaste virgin to her one husband' we see there is one person presented to us, because there is only the one bride. But the synagogue of heretics is by no means one with us, because the bride is neither adulteress nor whore—hence that synagogue is unable to produce children of God.³⁰

who take refuge in the Church from the snares of heresy should be baptized by us, who of His condescension are called the friends of God". Cited by Augustine in *De Baptismo* 6,18, PL 43,209.32; translated by J. R. King and C. D. Hartranft, [Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church 4], New York 1887.

²⁷ See above, note n. 5.

²⁸ Cyprian, *De ecclesiae catholicae unitate* 6, PL 4,518.10-519.7; translated by M. Bévenot, [Ancient Christian Writers 25], London 1957.

²⁹ *Epistola* 69.3, CCL 3c, 473.

³⁰ Firmilian's letter appears as letter 75 in the catalogue of Cyprian's

Firmilian here employs nuptial imagery to defend the claim that since the bride is one, only those in union with the bride can administer the sacrament of baptism. The Donatists will appeal to these earlier arguments in their claim that only they, who did not lapse under persecution, can validly administer baptism.

Augustine's response to these attacks is long and detailed. A full analysis of his position would take us too far afield.³¹ Our attention must instead be upon how he treats the tradition he inherits from Cyprian. Augustine concedes that Cyprian and other great lights from the African church held a position contrary to his own. They, however, lived "before this question was thoroughly investigated in the Catholic Church".³² Nevertheless, in Augustine's view, the core of their argument is still valid: the Church is Christ's sole bride, and those who separate from it are adulterers and do not give life. From Augustine's perspective, however, this fact does not support the earlier tradition's conclusions concerning rebaptism. Instead, it supports his position that baptism administered by heretics and schis-

correspondence (75.14, CCL 3c,594). The translation is from G. W. Clarke, [Ancient Christian Writers 47], New York 1989.

³¹ This much, at least, should be noted. In Augustine's view, the truth that the Donatists fail to see is that it is possible to be configured to the body of Christ in baptism, without thereby becoming living members of that body. Augustine uses the image of a hand cut off from the body. The hand retains the figure of a hand, but it ceases to be a living hand because it does not belong to the body. This is what happens in the baptism administered by heretics and schismatics. They will be configured to Christ, but unless they receive this gift in good faith in union with the faith of the one Church, they will be baptized into spiritual death, not life. He states this view nicely in *Sermon* 268, PL 38,1232.49: "What, after all, does it mean to expire, but to lose the spirit? But now, if a member is cut off from the body, the spirit doesn't follow, does it? And yet the member can be recognized for what it is; it's a finger, a hand, an arm, an ear. Apart from the body it retains its shape, it doesn't retain life. So too with persons separated from the Church. You ask them about the sacrament, you find it; you look for baptism, you find it; you look for the creed, you find it. That's the shape or form; unless you are quickened inwardly by the Spirit, any boasting you do about the outward form is meaningless".

³² *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 5,15, PL 35,1422.49. All quotations from Augustine's Commentary on the Gospel of John presented in this essay are from John W. Rettig's translation, [The Fathers of the Church 78, 88, 90, 92], Washington DC 1988-1995.

matics is valid, but not life-giving. Heretics and schismatics validly confer the sacrament of baptism, but in order for it to give life the recipient must be reconciled to full communion with the Catholic Church.

Ironically, it is the nuptial imagery used so forcefully by Cyprian and his colleagues that allows Augustine to transform the earlier tradition, and use it to reach a conclusion directly opposite from the one they had held. Augustine's method is simply to pay attention to what the "best man" at this wedding, John the Baptist, the "friend of the bridegroom", has to say about baptism and the bridegroom. Indeed, Augustine repeatedly tells his congregation to pay attention to John.³³

2.1. *The Baptist's Message*

As we have seen, a true friend is one who knows the secrets of his friend. Augustine makes it clear that John the Baptist is such of friend of Christ, the bridegroom. John knows the hidden things of Christ; Christ has revealed them to him. John's mission as a friend is precisely to make known to his people who Christ is.³⁴ In this context, John proclaims that Christ is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.³⁵ John reveals that it is Christ and Christ alone who administers this baptism. John's baptism was only a preparation and passes away, while Christ's is lasting. John himself made this clear to his disciples.

Now a discussion arose between John's disciples and a Jew over purifying. And they came to John, and said to him, 'Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you bore witness, here he is, baptizing, and all are going to him'. John answered, 'No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and listens to him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full (Io. 3, 25-30).

Augustine finds in the Baptist's response the answer to the Do-

³³ *Ibid.* tr. 13,10-12, 14-15; *Sermon* 292.8, PL 38,1526.18.

³⁴ *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 46, PL 35,1728.52.

³⁵ *Mt.* 3,11; *Mc.* 1,8; *Lc.* 3,16; *Io.* 1,33. See *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 6, PL 35, 1428.35.

natists' claims. John baptized only with water. Thus, his disciples still needed to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. They needed to receive the baptism that only Christ, the bridegroom, can give. Christ uses his servants, those who should be his friends, to administer this baptism; but it is he who baptizes.

And indeed, it was said about the Lord before he suffered, that he baptized more persons than John; and then it was added, 'Though he himself did not baptize, but his disciples' (*Io.* 4, 1-2). He himself, and yet not himself; he himself by power, they by their ministry. They performed a service in baptizing; the power of baptizing remained in Christ.³⁶

He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The Church belongs to Christ, and thus, it is Christ who baptizes. Even if the servants through whom Christ administers his baptism lapsed under persecution, or are heretics or are notorious sinners, Christ baptizes through them: "Those whom Judas baptized, Christ baptized".³⁷

Augustine invites another "friend of the bridegroom" to come to his defense. He quotes Paul, using the very passage which Firmilian used to defend rebaptism.

So too, the Apostle is the friend of the bridegroom; he is jealous too, not for himself, but for the bridegroom. Hear the voice of the one who is jealous: 'With the jealousy of God I am jealous of you,' (2 *Cor.* 11,2) he said, not with mine, nor for myself, but with the jealousy of God. Why? How? Who is she of whom you are jealous? For whom are you jealous? 'For I have espoused you to one husband that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ' (*Ibid.*). What therefore do you fear? Why are you jealous? 'I fear,' he says, 'lest, as the serpent seduced Eve by his subtlety, so too, your minds should be corrupted from the chastity which is in Christ' (2 *Cor.* 11,3).³⁸

In Augustine's view, both John and Paul defend the same truth: "He who has the bride is the bridegroom". They both defend that the Church has one husband, and he is Christ. This is also what Cyprian and Firmilian wanted to defend. Augustine agrees with his North African predecessors in arguing that heretics and schismatics are adulterers. He further agrees with them in asserting that those

³⁶ *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 5,18, PL 35,1423.54.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 5,18, PL 35,1424.11.

³⁸ *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 13,12, PL 35,1498.52.

who are in league with heretics and are baptized by them are not given a life-giving baptism. Nevertheless, he disagrees on this key point: Augustine holds that when heretics baptize, baptism is conferred. Why? Because baptism is from Christ and Christ is always a faithful bridegroom, even if those who should be his friends are not always faithful friends.³⁹

At this point Augustine makes an interesting shift in the earlier North African notion of spiritual adultery. For Firmilian, spiritual adultery consists in members of the bride of Christ being unfaithful to Christ and loving another husband.⁴⁰ Augustine recognizes this, and uses the analogy himself.⁴¹ Here, however, he is principally concerned to counter a different type of infidelity to Christ. He is concerned about the infidelity of the friends of the bridegroom who lead the bride to themselves instead of leading her to Christ. In Augustine's view, the Donatists are adulterers because they seek to usurp the place of the bridegroom. Instead of leading the bride as a chaste virgin to her spouse, they seek to take the bridegroom's place and to bring forth children in their own name.

Why do you put yourself in Christ's place? It's he that baptizes in the Holy Spirit. So it's he that justifies. As for you, what do you say? 'It's I that baptize in the Holy Spirit, I that justify'. Aren't you in fact saying, *I am the Christ?* Aren't you in fact one of those about whom it was said, *many will come in my name, saying, I am the Christ (Mt. 24,5)?* ... So don't go on saying any more, 'it's I that justify, I that sanctify,' or you will be convicted of saying, *I am the Christ.* Say rather what a friend of the bridegroom said, don't aim at pushing yourself forward instead of the bridegroom: *neither the one who plants is anything, nor the one who waters, but the one who gives growth, God (1 Cor 3,7).*⁴²

The Donatists argue that, because of their personal holiness and fidelity, it is they alone who confer a valid baptism. Augustine counters with the words of the true friend of the bridegroom: it is Christ who baptizes, because "he who has the bride is the bridegroom". To argue that the personal holiness of the minister is the deciding factor for the validity of the sacrament is to usurp the place

³⁹ *Ibid.* 5,19, PL 35,1424.18f.

⁴⁰ *Epistola* 75,14-15, CCL 3c,594.

⁴¹ *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 13,13, PL 35,1499.54.

⁴² *Sermon* 292.8, PL 38,1526.30.

of the bridegroom.⁴³ In reality, it is the holiness and fidelity of Christ that makes baptism valid.

In homilies and in other works from this period, Augustine continues to draw upon the testimony of John the Baptist and of Paul to defend his views concerning rebaptism. In the process, Augustine refines his presentation of what it means to be a friend of the bridegroom. For Augustine, John and Paul become the ideal embodiments of true ministry in the Catholic Church. It is this ideal which we are now in a position to investigate.

2.3. What it means to be a Friend of the Bridegroom

In Augustine's view, a friend of the bridegroom is one who prepares the way for the bridegroom, and reveals the bridegroom to his people.⁴⁴ He is able to do this, however, because before he spoke, he listened. The friend of the bridegroom "stands and listens" to the bridegroom, and "rejoices with joy at the bridegroom's voice" (*Io.* 3,29).

2.3.1. The Friend of the Bridegroom Stands and Listens

Augustine gives special attention to analyzing what it means to stand and listen to the bridegroom. Listening is the stance of humility. The humble listener stands and does not fall.⁴⁵ Augustine notes that the psalmist also commends listening: "To my listening you will give exultation and joy" (*Ps.* 51). Because of his humble listening, the Lord will fill him with joy and place him on his feet: "the bones that have been humbled shall exult" (*ibid.*). He stands, if he stands in Christ and perseveres in him.⁴⁶ He stands "in the courts of the house of our God", if he stands in the charity which God has poured into his heart.⁴⁷ He stands if he remains in the grace of Christ.⁴⁸ He stands if in humility he drinks from the "interior fountain" of God's grace.⁴⁹ On the other hand, those who lift themselves up in pride,

⁴³ *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 13,11, PL 35,1498.23.

⁴⁴ See *Sermon* 308A.2, PL 46,847.22, which significantly was preached on the Vespers of St. Cyprian's feast in 397.

⁴⁵ *Sermon* 288,2, PL 38,1303.6f.

⁴⁶ *En. in Psalmos* 131,14, PL 37,1722.12.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 133,1, PL 37,1737.4.

⁴⁸ *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 14,2, PL 35,1503.4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 25,17, PL 35,1605.49.

fall.⁵⁰ The devil is one of these. He did not listen to the bridegroom, and because of this he "did not stand in the truth" (*Io.* 8,44).⁵¹ One must choose, therefore, either to listen to the bridegroom or to listen to the serpent.⁵²

Augustine further argues that since the humble rejoice in the bridegroom's voice and not their own, the humble do not want others to listen to them, but only to the voice of Christ speaking through them.⁵³ Augustine sees this attitude as a model for true pastors in the Church.

All good pastors are in one and are one. They tend the flock and Christ tends the flock. For the friends of the bridegroom do not say that they rejoice in their own voice. Rather, they rejoice on account of the voice of the bridegroom. It is Christ himself, therefore, who tends the flock when they are tending it. He says, 'I tend it', because his voice is in theirs, and in them is his love.⁵⁴

True pastors, by listening humbly to Christ's voice are able to speak with his voice. They speak what they have heard.⁵⁵ What they have heard is the Father's one Word, and they speak with the voice of that Word.⁵⁶ Augustine shares with his congregation that he himself has experienced this.

Happier are those who listen than those who speak. For the one who learns is humble, but the one who teaches struggles against becoming proud, lest this malady should slip into him through complacency, lest he displease God by desiring to please others. Great is

⁵⁰ *Sermon* 292,8, PL 38,1327.1.

⁵¹ *En. in Psalmos* 133,1, PL 37,1737.25, *Sermon* 293D.3, PLS 2,596.27, *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 14,2, PL 35,1503.1.

⁵² *Sermon* 179, PL 38,967.22.

⁵³ *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 13,12, PL 35,1498.43: "[The Baptist] says 'I do not rejoice because of my own voice, but I rejoice because of the bridegroom's voice. It is my place to hear; his to speak. For I have need to be enlightened. He is the light; I am as an ear, he is the Word'. Therefore, the friend of the bridegroom stands and hears him".

⁵⁴ *Sermon* 46, PL 38,287.18.

⁵⁵ *En. in Psalmos* 61,19, PL 36,742.59.

⁵⁶ *Sermon* 293D.3, PLS 2, 596.32-57. For Augustine, the Baptist becomes the ideal type for every preacher: "He was cast in the symbolic role of all of them, he alone was the sacred and mystical representative or person of them all. That's why he is properly called the voice, as the sign and sacrament of all voices" (*Sermon* 288,4, PL 38.1306.34).

this fear for the one who teaches, my brothers and sisters, great is our fear in these words of ours. Believe our heart which you cannot see; he who calms us, he who is kind to us, sees how much we are filled with this fear in speaking to you. When, however, we hear him suggesting and teaching something to us internally, we are secure and secure we rejoice; for we are under the master, we seek his glory, we praise him who teaches us; his truth delights us internally, where no one makes nor hears a sound; it is there that the psalmist says that he will find his joy and his exultation.... And therefore, since he is humble, he hears. Who hears? Who truly hears and hears well? The humble hears; for his glory is in him from whom he hears what he hears.⁵⁷

Once again, Augustine presents the Baptist as one who embodies this ideal.

He who so humbled himself that he said that he was unworthy to loosen the strap of his Lord's sandal, John the Baptist, in the glory of his master and therefore of his friend, said, when he was being mistaken for the Christ - from which he could have become proud and exalted himself - 'he who has the bride is the bridegroom; and the friend of the bridegroom stands and listens to him... and he rejoices with joy to hear the bridegroom's voice'.⁵⁸

The ideal pastor is one who finds his joy in hearing the voice of his master. He hears the master's voice teaching him inwardly, and he hears the master's voice being proclaimed through him to his people. Essentially, the true pastor finds joy in being an intermediary between the lover and the beloved. The pastor rejoices because Christ shares his wisdom with him; but more importantly, the chaste pastor rejoices that he can share this wisdom with Christ's people. He is not trying to lead God's people to himself, nor to lead them away from the unity of the universal Church. Rather, he seeks only that the bride may find her bridegroom through him. His deepest desire is that the bride belong only and wholly to Christ. "He who has the bride is the bridegroom". The pastor's happiness, therefore,

⁵⁷ *En. in Psalmos* 50,13, PL 36,594.1. In at least one place, Augustine extends the analogy of friendship with the bridegroom to cover not just the bishops but the vocation of all those who teach. The true teacher is one who is "swift to hear but slow to speak" (*Iac.* 1,19). As a humble listener, the teacher learns wisdom and is able to join with John in rejoicing over the voice of the bridegroom (*Epistola* 266, PL 33,1090.46).

⁵⁸ *En. in Psalmos* 50,13, PL 36,594.26.

is the happiness of one who has been able to help his friend by caring for his bride.

2.3.2. *Friends of the Bridegroom Protect the Bride with Jealous Zeal*

In Augustine's view the Apostles and their successors are commissioned in a unique way to be the friends of the bridegroom.⁵⁹ They have been entrusted with the care of the bride until the bridegroom returns.

He spent forty days with them; as he was about to ascend into heaven, he again commended the Church to them (*Act. 1, 6*). The bridegroom setting off on a journey commended his bride to his friends - not to love any particular one of them; but to love him as bridegroom, them as friends of the bridegroom, none of them as if he were the bridegroom. The bridegroom's friends are properly jealous about this, and do not allow her to be corrupted by any flirtatious sort of love. They hate it when they are loved and flirted with like that.⁶⁰

Augustine has combined the Gospel story of the nobleman who entrusts his property to his servants while he goes on a journey to receive his kingdom (*Lc. 19,11*) with the nuptial imagery that we have already seen. The Apostles, and their successors the bishops, have been entrusted with the care of his bride. They are to see to it that she loves only him. The Christian pastor is to ensure that the Christians of his community love only Christ, and that whatever else they love be loved in Christ.

We have already seen how, in Augustine's view, Paul embodies this attitude. Paul is a jealous friend who presented the bride to Christ, and is jealous lest she be seduced away from Christ by the serpent. Paul's attitude leads Augustine to exclaim,

Notice how jealous this friend of the bridegroom is; ... What a friend! He thrusts away from himself the love of another man's bride. He doesn't want himself to be loved instead of the bridegroom, because he wants to be able to reign with the bridegroom.⁶¹

⁵⁹ The Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles and their successors all seem to have, in Augustine's mind, a unique status which is expressed in the title "friend of the bridegroom". See *En. in Psalmos* 128, PL 37,1696.12.

⁶⁰ *Sermon* 268,4, PL 38,1233.55.

⁶¹ *Sermon* 268,4, PL 38,1234.5,15.

Not surprisingly, in Augustine's judgment the Baptist also embodies this ideal. Of John he says,

He, however, is the bridegroom's friend, jealous for the bridegroom; and he doesn't put himself forward as an adulterer in the bridegroom's place, but bears witness to his friend, and commends the one who really was the bridegroom to the bride. He wants to be loved in him, hates the idea of being loved instead of him.⁶²

Paul and John want only to lead God's people to Christ. By presenting them as the ideal, Augustine is hammering home to the congregations of North Africa the true nature of the vocation to which Christian pastors are called. In doing so, he is inviting them to conclude that this ideal is not being lived among the Donatist bishops. He is also, however, presenting an ideal for his fellow Catholic bishops to follow. He is speaking both to pastors and to the faithful. The bishops are to lead the faithful to Christ; the faithful are to love their bishops only as friends of the bridegroom, and not as the bridegroom. Thus, Augustine can say to the people of Hippo,

Accordingly, my brothers and sisters, let no one fool you, let no one deceive you. Love the peace of Christ, who was crucified for us although he was God. Paul says, 'Neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase' (*1 Cor 3, 7*). And does anyone of us say that he is anything? If we say that we are something and do not give glory to him, we are adulterers; and we want ourselves, not the bridegroom, to be loved. You, love Christ, and us in him in whom you are loved by us. Let the members love each other, but let them all live under the head.⁶³

The pastors are to love the faithful as their friend's bride; the faithful are to love their pastors as friends of their bridegroom.

3. *Conclusion*

When viewed within the context of the universal Christian call to divine friendship, the apostolic call to be the friends of the bridegroom acquires new significance. All Christians are called to love the members of the bride of Christ in ways that lead them to love the bridegroom more faithfully. As other studies have pointed out,

⁶² *Sermon* 288, PL 38,1302.12.

⁶³ *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 13,17, PL 35,1501.46.

Augustine is deeply concerned to teach the faithful how to love rightly the beautiful things of creation.⁶⁴ The Christian should love all people, but only in a way that leads them and him to God. Seen within this context, Augustine's understanding of friendship with the bridegroom is merely the application of his theology of Christian love to the particular vocation of the Apostles and their successors. The bishop, like every other Christian, is called to love others in a way that leads them and him to Christ. Yet, the office of bishop places those who hold it in a unique relationship with Christ and imposes upon them unique demands. The nature of this relationship and of these demands were exactly what was at issue in Augustine's controversies with the Donatists. The term friendship with God offered Augustine a powerful and easily understood analogy for explaining the apostolic ministry and the community of the Church. It was powerful because the Donatists themselves employed spousal imagery to defend their views. It was easily understood because the demands of marriage and friendship were part of the every day experience of Augustine's contemporaries. A man of means has gone on a journey and has entrusted his friend with the care of his household and bride. The friend is expected to be a faithful friend and not love the bride in a way that leads her away from her husband. For a culture where men of means were often called to travel for months away from home, Augustine has found in the Scriptures a powerful analogy for explaining to his people the vocation of their pastors and the relationship which the faithful are called to have with them.

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⁶⁴ See for example, C. White, pp. 185-217, J. McEvoy, pp. 68-91; M. A. McNamara, pp. 213-242.