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A
Pastoral Rule
for TODAY

REVIVING *an* ANCIENT PRACTICE

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The Grace of Theological Friendships

AUGUSTINE



THOUGH HE IS BELOVED by many for his very personal and severely introspective autobiography—the *Confessions*—this project was addressed to God alone. And though it introduces a new literary form of individual psychological self-examination, containing thoughts throughout that are profoundly idiosyncratic, Augustine lived in chosen and constant community. He was never alone.

This chapter follows Augustine’s life with friends and his thinking about his friendships, and it challenges us to think about who has accompanied us on our journey into the Christian life and ministry. What role have friends played in our thinking, speaking, and acting?

We may not agree with all that Augustine believed about friends and friendship. He and his friends in Hippo were celibate. Their community was gender exclusive. He defines friendship as agreement in things divine and human, accompanied by kindness and affection, in Christ Jesus our Lord, who is our true peace. He believes, in no uncertain terms, that friendship is true only between fellow believers.

Regardless of what we make of Augustine’s own example, he pushes us to ask whether we as pastors are in mutually accountable friendships. What barriers are there to this in our lives and ministries? How will we remove these barriers, for the sake of God, for the sake of the other, and for our own sake?

The *Confessions* blesses us with an intimate account of the journey that God had been leading Augustine on since his boyhood and that now, as a man, he had consciously committed to walk. Every step along the way was taken with others. To trace Augustine's travels is to see a shared pilgrimage.

At first it was with family, dominated by his ever-present mother Monica and a gang of boys. Then it was fellow students who took their studies seriously and together sought the best in life. Here Augustine begins to distinguish himself within his circle of friends. Whatever they would decide, they would decide on it and live it out together. Their conversions to the Christian faith, though recorded as the work of God within individuals, were within a short space of time. Some of their baptismal dates were shared. Their calls to ordained ministry occurred one right after another as well, with Augustine leading the way. It is an overstatement, but nearly everyone who went to kindergarten with Augustine became a bishop.

Finally, what had begun in one of the most desolate places—Thagaste, a small village on the edge of the Sahara—and had ended in the bishoprics of the major cities of North Africa was, for the last part of the trail, characterized by intentional communal living and constant travel between the communities. In the violent days of the end of Roman rule, Augustine and his friends traveled dangerous roads to be with one another at the journey's end. The night before the barbarians entered the gates of Augustine's final home, the deathbed of the aged bishop was surrounded by leaders of the church in North Africa, many of whom had been his school friends. Augustine was never alone.

FRIENDSHIP AMONG THIEVES AND AS A PAGAN

Many of us vaguely remember the *Confessions* for a story told in painstaking detail—the childhood theft of a pear.¹ A gang of boys, out late at night as was their custom, plotted and executed a theft of pears from a neighboring orchard. With Augustine among them, they stole an immense load, took a bite of a few, and threw the majority into a nearby hog pit. The boys were neither hungry nor poor, Augustine reports. They did it for the hell of it—he did not even like pears, he confesses. The crime itself was the attraction. “In its commission, our pleasure

¹Augustine, *Confessiones* 2.4.9–2.10.18. All translations of Augustine are from the Latin and are my own. For an excellent and new translation, see Sarah Ruden, *Confessions* (New York: Modern Library, 2017).

was purely that it was forbidden.”² He did it for the love of evil alone, and truly loved it.

Augustine considers whether the company of that night influenced his deeds: Did my desire to be with and please them move me to do what I otherwise would not have done? No and yes, Augustine answers. He remained certain that he did this for the love of theft alone. That is what was in him all along, what came from within him that night. But, he says with equal candor, placing no blame on his teenaged companions, he knew for certain that he would not have done this if he had been alone. By rubbing against his late-night friends, the itch of his desires was inflamed. His accomplices did not put the distorted desire in him; they increased it and drew it out.

He reports that they laughed and laughed for having played a trick on the owners who knew nothing of it at the time and who, in time, they imagined, would become furious. And, he observes, people seldom laugh alone.

This, O God, is the still vivid memory of my heart. I would not have stolen alone; my pleasure was not in what I stole but that I stole; yet, I would not have enjoyed it if done alone; I would not have done it alone. O unfriendly friendship, you inscrutable seducer of the soul, you avid appetite to do damage to the other out of sheer sport and silliness without gain or glory, you, with merely the word, “Hey, let’s do it!” make us ashamed not to be shameful.

And with “I cannot bear to think of this any longer,” Augustine quits the story.³

But the sober, sustained consideration of friendship will be seen in many passages to come. Augustine will attempt to penetrate the “inscrutable” nature of friendship so that he and his friends, all now adults, may receive friendship as a gift given them by God. Another story from his early years will help us see the wounds that Augustine bore when he reconsidered the friendships that God intended for blessing.⁴

His first teaching post was in his hometown. So too was that of an old playmate and school pal. They were the same age (“in the flower of our youth”⁵), their intellectual interests were alike, and their friendship became very dear. Their common studies further united them upon reunion, and they spent their days

²Augustine, *Confessiones* 2.4.9.

³Augustine, *Confessiones* 2.9.17-18.

⁴Augustine, *Confessiones* 4.4.7-4.12.

⁵Augustine, *Confessiones* 4.4.7.

together. Within a year, Augustine gladly recalls, this renewed friendship became sweeter to him than all other things in life.

They were both young and impressionable, but the friend was influenced more by Augustine than vice versa—all for the worst, Augustine remembers. He persuaded his friend to believe the same fairy tales he believed—those superstitions that caused his Christian mother to weep for him. They wandered in error together, and the togetherness was the dearest part of Augustine’s life. “Until,” he prays without complaint, “you, O God, who are at the same time both Lord of Revenge and Fount of Mercy took him from me.”⁶ All of this happened within a year’s time.

While the friend lay on his sick bed, sweating in delirium and fevers, Christians came and, without the sick friend’s consent or even knowledge, baptized him. Augustine paid little attention to this, knowing that when his friend’s sanity was restored they would both have a good laugh. But when the friend partially recovered and Augustine told him what had happened and began to mock the event, the friend did not join in. Instead, with a severe look he warned Augustine that if he valued the friendship he would cease his mockery. “I’ll wait until he fully recovers,” Augustine reports thinking.⁷ But his friend did not recover. The fever returned, and within a few days he died. “I was not there,” Augustine says with grief.

My heart was black with grief. Everything I saw looked like death; my hometown was a prison and my home an unfamiliar unhappiness; the things we had done together now became torture; my eyes searched for him, but he was not there; I loathed the spaces we had been because of his absence; and those spaces could not promise, “He will come soon again,” as they once could do whenever he had been absent before. . . . Tears took the place in the love of my heart he had held. . . . I have no doubt I would have died, if given the opportunity to be with him. . . . I was weary of life and afraid of death . . . he was “the half of my soul” [quoting Horace]. . . . I thought of my soul and his as one soul in two bodies; and my life became a horror to me because I was unwilling to live life halved. . . . I raged and sighed and wept and was in torment, unable to rest, unable to think; I bore my soul, broken and bloodied and which I hated to carry, because I could not find a place to set it down. . . . I hated all things. So I left the town of Thagaste and came to Carthage.⁸

⁶Augustine, *Confessiones* 4.4.7.

⁷Augustine, *Confessiones* 4.4.8.

⁸Augustine, *Confessiones* 4.4.8–4.7.12.

There the narrative ends and Augustine's reflections on friendship begin. He never repents of this haunting (though at the end troubled) friendship, nor will he speak of another with such sustained passion or mourn a loss with such inconsolable grief. But he will learn to think and speak of it in different terms than he experienced it. God, he will say now after much reflection and his own baptism, spared the friendship by allowing the friend to die in the joy of his baptism rather than in a shared scorn, so that this friendship now awaits renewal when Augustine joins him in death. What Augustine only wondered about in the fables of the pagans—Pylades and Orestes, who would have gladly died at the same time to be together, as he remembers the ancient myth—he now is certain of in the promises of God. His grief is consolable because his friend can be found again in new and eternal places.

THINKING AND RE-THINKING FRIENDSHIP

A boyhood prank submitted to such a rigorous self-examination and considered so thoroughly in terms of friendship was unknown in the ancient world. Sin, its discovery in the heart, and the exacting, agonizing confession of it would be a distinctly Christian contribution to the literature of late antiquity.

Other ancients had written to express their grief at the untimely death of a friend. Though Augustine's rhetoric here was high, and few had risen to such heights in its telling, it was not unheard of. Death was universal, grief was common, and ancient authors had previously attempted to describe that grief, even in such powerful and personal terms.

Friendships too, of course, were known by the ancients and recorded in letters, journals, and speeches in both Greek and Latin literature. A few writers had written essays on the subject, Cicero chief among them. Augustine had very early on found his treatment of friendship persuasive, and he made reference to Cicero several times in his own essay on the subject and in passing in his letters.

Cicero's well-known work *On Friendship* states, "Friendship is nothing other than agreement on all things divine and human, along with good will and affection."⁹ Augustine will quote this definition in essays and letters with uniform approval. While the referents for what is to be agreed on in "things divine and human" would become distinctly Christian for Augustine, the definition remained unchanged. The late-night raiders and the two school teacher pagans had

⁹Cicero, *Laelius de Amicitia* 6.20. Quoted by Augustine often, including in *Contra Academicos* 6.13 and *Epistulae* 258.1.

agreed on the wrong things, but the friendships were true nonetheless. One sees no variation in Augustine's thinking about friendship.

Until, that is, the writing of the *Confessions* in his mid-forties. When revisiting the friendships of his youth, he reconsiders the nature and then the definition of those friendships. Cicero will never again be cited on the subject of friendship without addition or correction.

This is a postconversion transformation of thought. Augustine's letters had cited Cicero approvingly without reserve after his baptism. But after the reflections necessary for writing the *Confessions*, friendship will come to have an altered definition, and Augustine will discuss friendships in more theological terms and with more spiritual urgency. He will repent of Cicero's definition.

In one of the first letters sent immediately after writing the *Confessions*, Augustine speaks at length of friendship to his "oldest friend" Marcianus.¹⁰ With what can only be described as a sharp break with his earlier understandings, he declares that the two of them have only now become friends: "I really did not have you as a friend until we were bound in Christ."¹¹

He quotes Tully (Cicero's nickname), "the greatest Roman author," as he had often done before, but now he insists on a revision. After offering to Marcianus the familiar quote, "Friendship is agreement on things divine and human with kindness and affection," he argues that the two of them never had that friendship before because neither had been a Christian. "We agreed on human things the way others (pagans) did, but our friendship was defective," he states, "because we did not agree on things divine, which is the more important part of the definition."¹²

Two things should be noted here. First, they were agreed, we would say, on things divine—both were pagans in their youth; they were both wrong about things divine, we would say, but in agreement. Yet Augustine has now defined agreement as not only shared thought but correct thought. Two "friends" equally wrong about things divine are no longer included in the definition of those who are "in agreement" or are "friends." Second, Augustine concedes gladly and with fond remembrance that their agreement was "with kindness and affection." Augustine is clearly enjoying the reconnection with his childhood friend, but he also takes the opportunity to announce his revised opinion on what makes a friendship.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Epistulae* 258.

¹¹ Augustine, *Epistulae* 258.1.

¹² Augustine, *Epistulae* 258.2.

Later in the letter he denies that he and Marcianus were agreed even on things human, for one must be agreed first on things divine, which are the basis for things human. Then, stating the matter more severely, he says they had no friendship then, not even in part. In arguing this, Augustine continues to gladly admit his genuine delight in the friendship he had with Marcianus then and now. They were affectionate toward one another then, he will say, but it was impossible to be friends in the truest sense. “How could we be?” he reasons. “I could not even be a friend to myself, so sinful was I.”¹³ Christian theology was trumping a kind and affectionate memory but not denying it.

Augustine wrote this letter upon the recent conversion of Marcianus. It allows Augustine to clarify his new thinking about friendship and, at the same time, with the same words, celebrate a friendship that, in God’s providence, had begun poorly in late-night pranks and that, just now, was begun again in the bright light of God’s salvation. This, Augustine says, is the reason for the joy he had because of Marcianus, who had for so long been a friend “in some kind of way” and that now is a friend “in a true way”: “You who formerly shared this passing life with me in the most charming kindness,” he writes, “have now begun to be with me in the hope of life eternal. . . . Now we are agreed even on all things human because we consider them in the light of things divine.”¹⁴

With that, Augustine returns to Cicero’s definition and restates it: “We now have that ‘agreement about things divine and human, with kindness and affection’ in Christ Jesus our Lord, who is our truest peace.”¹⁵ Augustine will never again quote Cicero without that addition.

Further, Augustine will define, for the first time, what constitutes things divine and human. It is the keeping of the great commandment—you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all you mind, and you will love your neighbor as yourself. The first part is agreement on things divine, the second in agreement on things human. If, Augustine concludes, you tenaciously hold these two things with me, then our friendship will be true and for always. We will be joined not only to each other but to the Lord himself.

In the letter’s last paragraph, Augustine quotes Terence and Virgil back and forth with Marcianus, announcing that Christ is the culmination of their hopes

¹³Augustine, *Epistulae* 258.2.

¹⁴Augustine, *Epistulae* 258.3.

¹⁵Augustine, *Epistulae* 258.4.

and prophecies. He urges him to be baptized as soon as possible and offers a benediction: “May the Lord God, in whom you now trust, both in this world and in the world to come, keep you—you, my rightly honored lord and brother in Christ, most loved and most longed for.”¹⁶

DEFINING FRIENDSHIPS OF GRACE

Several new themes on friendship are sounded in the writings of Augustine. If a title is to be given to this score, it is best named *The Grace of Theological Friendships*. We have seen him redefine friendship as that which is *in Christ Jesus*. With that small phrase attached to Cicero’s definition, Augustine has transferred human friendships from the created order to the redemptive. He will write about general human friendships only in passing and in relation to what he has left behind. Occasionally he will contrast these redeemed relationships with those of the pagans. Augustine, who will become known through the centuries as the church’s “doctor of grace,” has now placed friendship within the realm of grace. He is the first to do so, and later Christian writers will follow his lead.

Because there is no one complete treatment of friendship in Augustine, it is not possible to write systematically of the characteristics of friendship or to prioritize them. Yet some themes appear so frequently that we can safely assume their centrality to the whole.

Honesty, the attribute that Augustine found so necessary for writing such a revealing autobiography, must be ever present. This, in part, is honesty with oneself. He is humble (that is, honest) enough to say that he still does not know himself; that the friend he knows best, Alypius, does not know himself; and that the two are unknown to each other.¹⁷ What he expects in the absence of full self-knowledge is frankness and openness—a willingness to speak the truth as best we know it and to live in full view of one another. The virtue beneath this honesty is truth: “A person must be a friend of truth before they can be a friend to any human being,” Augustine says.¹⁸ He seems to mean two things by this one announcement: there must be truthfulness between the two friends, and there must be a common pursuit of the truth. This honesty knows no subject too grand

¹⁶Augustine, *Epistulae* 258.5.

¹⁷Augustine, *Soliloquia* 1.3.8.

¹⁸Augustine, *Epistulae* 155.1.1.

(the ways of God in the world) nor too small (friends admit to each other what bothers and irritates them).¹⁹

Trust emerges, but only over time: “How confused it all is! The one who at first appears an enemy is revealed as a friend, and the one who is thought to be a friend later is known as our worst enemy.”²⁰ Nonetheless, Augustine counsels, jump in and take chances. Friendship is too important to miss for fear, and isolation is a vice.²¹ Do not be too cautious; it weakens a friendship in its inception, so be willing to be a friend with anyone. You cannot know friend from foe until you engage. “A man is known only through friendships.”²²

Equality is a theme less pronounced but seems to be assumed throughout. Mutuality is mandated and reciprocity recommended. Different needs and gifts at different times are inherent in all friendships and may suggest temporary comparative strengths and weaknesses: One person may need to correct, another to be corrected; one may need to speak recklessly, the other to listen intently; one may need to be brave for the other; one may need to suggest caution to the other. But there is no indication that these roles are not reversible and to be found in the friends alternately and equally.²³ “The eyes of friends look *at* each other, not *up* or *down* on each other.”²⁴

Care is a lovely theme heard perhaps most often. We want the best for our friends. Again, the doctor of grace defines that in distinctly Christian terms. The best for them is God, so we want their conversion and the life of holiness that follows.²⁵ We want to know God, we want our friends to know God, and we want to know and enjoy each other—in God.²⁶ This care is practical. We bear each other’s burdens.²⁷ To illustrate this mutual help, Augustine paints the scene of a herd of deer fording a stream: one will go first to break the force of the water for the sake of the others, but when he becomes tired he will go to the rear of the herd so he can benefit from the protection of others.²⁸ True friendships, meant to be

¹⁹Augustine, *De Diversis Quaestionibus Octaginta Tribus* 71.6; Augustine, *Epistulae* 82.36; Augustine, *Sermones* 87.12.15.

²⁰Augustine, *Sermones* 49.4.4.

²¹Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 19.12.

²²Augustine, *De Diversis Quaestionibus Octaginta Tribus* 71.5.

²³Augustine, *De Trinitate* 9.4.6; Augustine, *De Fide Rerum Invisibilium* 1.2.4.

²⁴Augustine, *Contra Duas Epistulas Pelagianorum* 1.1 (emphasis added).

²⁵Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* 1.12.21; Augustine, *Epistulae* 258.1-2.

²⁶Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* 1.27.28.

²⁷Augustine, *De Fide Rerum Invisibilium* 1.1.3.

²⁸Augustine, *De Diversis Quaestionibus Octaginta Tribus* 71.1.

enjoyed in good times, are forged in bad times. They are tested and found true and then valued all the more. Friendships make difficult times bearable and glad times all the more glad. Praying for each other, forgiving each other, acknowledging the need of each other, readily assisting each other, and sacrificing and sympathizing for each other define this Christian caring and bearing.

Love is the one strain that unites these themes. Love of God is the only right and true love. From this all good comes. Love of friend is a love of God for the sake of the friend, and a love of God is a love of the friend for the sake of God.²⁹ The two greatest commandments meet here. This love of God is an upward gravity, Augustine will argue in many places, and our love is made possible by it only. He seems to be imagining a triangle in which two otherwise separated people are drawn closer by both being drawn toward the apex. Friends spur each other on to love God more and, in doing so, make possible, even probable, their greater love for each other. Likewise, friends love each other most truly when they see more closely God in each other. When they do not see it, they are to encourage it and correct any waning of or error in that love. Friends do not fault the temptations and inclinations of each other. These things are to be revealed to each other in mutual tolerance and understanding. Thus, these friends become better positioned to help each other avoid sin and correct each other when one sins. This is the most important duty friends owe. It is hard work, for the temptations to sin are fewer than the temptations to avoid correcting the friend who sins. Friends are tempted to avoid both loving the other in this way and receiving this love from a friend because of shame, fear, danger of spiritual safety, flattery, or simple selfishness. We are not to be silent with a friend out of a bland kindness. The friend is more important than the friendship—do not risk the first for the sake of the latter. We have a preference, Augustine announces, that our friends should die rather than fall from faith and virtue. We are to resist in others what we resist in ourselves. This work of correction is to be done in such a way that it both protects the friend's good name and restores the friend. Only in this way does the friendship itself fulfill its purpose and thrive.

Christ-centeredness is the note most distinct from anything Augustine had heard in his pagan predecessors and was sounded first in Augustine's redefinition. Friendships are to be rooted in Christ the mediator,³⁰ who unites the friends,

²⁹Augustine, *Sermones* 336.2.

³⁰Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 10.32.

purifies the whole person and cleanses both the friends and the friendship,³¹ enables the friends to cleave to each other with a pure and holy love to God,³² and sends the Holy Spirit, who accompanies the friends in their elevation and transformation as fellow pilgrims.³³ Christ gives the grace of friendship.

This friendship is perfected in the presence of Christ in heaven, not here, as Augustine was painfully aware.³⁴ Here there are slights and suspicions, quarrels and wars, unknown hearts, fickle friends, secret treachery.³⁵ Augustine will warn of this but report little of it in his letters.

What he will report repeatedly in his correspondence is anxiety for the well-being of his friends—those who were at a distance and exposed to the trials and temptations of life and death. Augustine will say more than once that fear for friends multiplies with the number of friends. As he ages, his fears are heard more often. Augustine will speak of disaster, disease, captivity, and slavery. His letters reveal the torments of a man whose friends suffered greatly.

Augustine will say that the joy of saints is the death of a friend—one no longer in danger of being broken or corrupted.³⁶ This is triumph, not defeat. Hear in this musical phrase how much the young, unconverted Augustine, now a mature Christian who has witnessed much suffering and lost many friends along the way, has changed since the long-lamented death of his beloved early companion. He will affirm that this change, all for the better, is grace—the grace of friends.

LIVING THEOLOGICAL FRIENDSHIPS

From these themes emerge not only a fuller sound but a vision of how Augustine lived in the grace of friendships. The vision is made more vivid by the scenes we glimpse in his own portraits of the life lived with his friends and in the scenes painted by his first biographer. The scenes are robust and tender, daily and lifelong, and both deeply emotive and highly spiritual.

They were also profoundly intellectual. Augustine and his dear friends were united in intellectual conversations and theological endeavors. These friendships

³¹Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 10.12, 14; 11.1-2.

³²Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 10.26-27.

³³Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 13.24.

³⁴Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 15.3.

³⁵Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 19.5.

³⁶Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 19.8.

were theological friendships. Friendship was still agreement on matters divine and human, which demanded committed, sustained conversation.

While some of this agreement might have been easily present at the outset and quickly recognized in one another, resulting in friendships formed on a shared basis, it is far truer of Augustine in his youth that he and his friends were fellow seekers of the truth. The agreement was more a matter of method and common travel than content and arrival.

The cohort journeyed together through various philosophies and heresies. Augustine will talk of being converted to Cicero; his biographers will speak of his being converted to Mani. These conversions could be led by one and joined later by others, but often, in a short space of time, they would agree together that they were closer to finding the truth of matters divine and human, then just as quickly agree that they were not, and thus continue the journey in another direction. The young Augustine, we think, followed as much as led. His mother was so convinced of this that her prayers for his conversion to the Christian faith were accompanied by her appeals that he separate from his friends.

At times these friends also parted ways. Friendship was based on agreement, and to agree no longer on which direction the search should travel was to cease journeying together. From their youth into their thirties, the ship sailed constantly. It would stop briefly at port, but failure to board in the morning was to break company. Often, it appears, some would drop out for a while only to catch up later. But it also appears that they were willing to part company. The search was serious. Truth was the highest value, and leaving travel companions to search for it was dreaded but possible.

These journeys were intellectual and practical. These young men were seeking a way to live. One would arrive at the final destination by thinking it through fully—never being fully satisfied with anything other than being fully satisfied. And though they truly prized each other's companionship along the way, they were determined to seek truth until it was found. They expected to arrive and seem not to have celebrated the journey for the journeying's sake, however enjoyable sailing together had been. The prayer of these young pagans and heretics was to arrive together. And they did.

Augustine's conversion was accompanied by those of his friends. Here he seems to have led, but close readings of the *Confessions* suggest that some of his

friends were waiting for him. Augustine signaled his readiness to be baptized soon after conversion, and his baptismal date was shared.

The journeys of the North African friends had been literal as well. From the remote villages to the neighboring towns to the big city of Carthage, they had moved together. They arrived at a particular place and philosophy together; they stayed in schools of thought and spaces with each other. Lately the journey had taken them to Italy and the highest and most robust academic culture of the empire. Augustine's appointment was as the Emperor's Chair of Rhetoric at the imperial city of Milan. He traveled and lived there with his friends.

Ambrose was bishop there. No living person—pagan, heretic, or Christian—would ever impress Augustine more. His descriptions and declarations of admiration for Ambrose in the *Confessions* are highly personal, but they were experiences, for the most part, shared with his friends. They attended his sermons together in the mornings and debated them together later in the day.

Augustine and his friends also moved together. Following the path of Ambrose, who had been brought to Milan by the emperor as governor and later had very publicly and dramatically resigned this post to become bishop, Augustine resigned his emperor-appointed academic position upon conversion. In a profound sense, when Augustine traveled to Milan he was never further from home, and when he came to Christ by the ministrations of the bishop of Milan he was never closer to where he had begun his journeys. All that remained was to go home.

And home he went, but after completing her life's work—the prayers that were answered with the conversion of her son—his mother died soon after his baptism. There was irony as well as resolution in this timing and place. Years before, to avoid either saying goodbye to her or taking her with him, Augustine had fled to Italy, lying to her about his intentions. He stole away across the Mediterranean on a sailing ship late in the night with his friends. Now they all returned home together, leaving Monica's body in an Italian churchyard.

Before leaving Italy, Augustine toured a monastery—a place that, in the centuries to come, historians would recognize as an intentional Christian community that would be a precursor to the monasteries of later ages. He and his friends were impressed with what they saw. The memory did not leave them, and it is easy to imagine that plans were formed and reformed until they had a chance to do something about them. Soon they did. Augustine was soon pressed into being ordained a priest back home and shortly thereafter after a bishop. *Pressed* is a

fitting description, summoning images of civilians being kidnapped and forced into serving on sailing vessels for commercial or military purposes. Devout Christians avoided the press of ordination so that they could attend to their faith. Although a bishopric was prestigious, some reasoned that ordination would stunt faithfulness since the bishop was a slave to the demands of public life and, what was worse, the public. It was inescapable and largely undesirable.

Augustine and his friends invented a solution—the home of the bishop. As priest, not knowing he would become a bishop elsewhere (Augustine writes of carefully planning travel itineraries to avoid any diocese that lacked a bishop), he and his friends set up housekeeping with the permission of the bishop. The committed, sustained conversations continued. All matters of faith and faithful living were now open before them. And, just as important, they were committed to the rigorous demands that this new Christian life placed on each of them and between them. Augustine, and the priests gathered around him, attempted a variety of forms of common living. They made adjustments. But, being priests, under a bishop, however understanding and partial that bishop was to Augustine, did not permit them enough freedom to build the community they desired. When he was pressed into being a bishop, they knew what they wanted to do and they did it.

Possidius had been a friend and companion of Augustine from well before this time, and remained so until his death. He expresses gratitude for having known Augustine for “almost forty years.”³⁷ Possidius was Augustine’s appointed trustee of his library and literary corpus and was also his first biographer. His account of this season in the theologian’s life picks up where the *Confessions* left off.

It is the report of a household. Augustine and his friends gave up possessions and lands for “fasting, prayers, and good works, meditating day and night in the Law of the Lord.”³⁸ Augustine had sold all he had to buy a large home with a garden. It was the bishop’s residence and home to the parish priests under him. More and more of these priests were his friends. The home would have many additions through the years to accommodate the growing number of these friends and to provide hospitality for the many pilgrims who came to consult the great bishop.

It was also a seminary of sorts. Lay people became priests, and the priests bishops. The towns and cities of North Africa were asking Augustine for priests and bishops like himself. He was now providing the North African church with

³⁷Possidius, *Sancti Augustini Vita Scripta a Possidio Episcopo* 31.11.

³⁸Possidius, *Sancti Augustini Vita Scripta a Possidio Episcopo* 45.3.

its clergy, who in turn used their residences as places of theological training and pastoral duty. Eventually, more than ten of his childhood friends became bishops. The bishops and theologians in the North African ecclesiastical debates against the Donatists, Pelagians, and others resembled the roll call an earlier generation of Augustine and his schoolmates.³⁹

Augustine traveled for primarily two reasons in this last season of his life—first, for theological consultations, to and from which he traveled with his friends, and second, simply for visiting friends. Matters of faith and the friends of faith were all that mattered in the end.

The intentional Christian community Augustine and his cohort set up in Hippo was modeled after the early church in Acts. Possidius reports that their intention was “to live with the servants of God according to the manner and rule instituted by the holy apostles.”⁴⁰

This garden house is best described as being moderately ascetic. The priests all wore simple but well-made black robes, ate their meals together at the same table, and held possessions in common, having given all previous possessions to the community.

The church fund for the clergy was the same fund for the poor. When the congregation murmured about this, Augustine offered to let them be the trustees and live as he did. They declined. Augustine appears to have administered this fund so as not to put anyone else in the unenviable position of deciding whether to provide medical care for a companion versus the daily bread of the poor. But this managerial role seems to be an exceptional one for Augustine to play within the community. He never had the key to the property or wore the bishop’s ring, says Possidius. Everything, even his own expenses, was paid by voucher and open for all in the home to inspect.⁴¹

Possessions united the residents and once nearly divided them. Augustine’s handling of this matter says much about his community and his leadership within it. All the priests who served with Augustine gave all their possessions to and lived in the community. Yet one priest, Januarius, who had some measure of wealth, gave much to the community upon ordination and entrance. At his death, his will revealed he had not given all. He bequeathed a large sum to his daughter,

³⁹Possidius, *Sancti Augustini Vita Scripta a Possidio Episcopo* 63.11.

⁴⁰Possidius, *Sancti Augustini Vita Scripta a Possidio Episcopo* 49.5.

⁴¹Possidius, *Sancti Augustini Vita Scripta a Possidio Episcopo* 95.23.

excluding his son, and bequeathed a still sizable remainder to the community. Augustine declined the gift. He argued that if Januarius were alive, he would persuade him to reconcile with his son. The revelation of withheld funds produced much ill will in the community. A priest had entered the community but not given all to be held in common. This was deception. To prevent this from happening again, Augustine reluctantly changed the terms of entrance into the community. There would no longer be an absolute condition of poverty for the priests under his care, but, and here was the sting, if the priest did not take the vow of poverty, he could not live with Augustine and the others in the bishop's residence.⁴²

Another story, told by Possidius, shows another side of Augustine's community and leadership. It was at the dinner table that Augustine welcomed guests, participated in conversation, and read with others. He loved this more than the eating and drinking that took place. Augustine had inscribed in the table this poem in Latin, "Who injures the name of an absent friend, May not at this table as guest attend." In this he warned against gossip, coarse speech about others, and bearing false witness against a neighbor. At one meal with mostly fellow bishops in attendance, Augustine became so exasperated with their conversation that violated this warning that he rebuked them in the midst of the meal, asking which was to be done: should they remove the inscription or should he remove himself? "Both I and others at the table," Possidius reports, "experienced this."⁴³

This community probably had some rules, but, contrary to claims from the Middle Ages, no written record of them remains. Perhaps they were never written. How many written rules do friends need? The closest we can come to reading an "Augustinian Rule" is from a letter he wrote to the leader of the women's community under his care. The women's residence had been established by Augustine's widowed sister and apparently was of some size and at some distance from the bishop's residence. His sister died, highly beloved by the sisters of the community, and was replaced by her chosen successor, less beloved. The sisters complained to Augustine, noting how wonderful his sister was and how her assistant and now successor was less so. They asked him to come and replace her, but he declined to come, stating that he would delay coming until harmony was restored and that he supported the new leader, asking the women to honor the memory of his sister by honoring her beloved successor.

⁴²Possidius, *Sermones* 355.

⁴³Possidius, *Sancti Augustini Vita Scripta a Possidio Episcopo* 95.12.

Apparently more than personalities were at issue, for Augustine takes the occasion to write some ground rules for the community:

- ◆ Unity was of the first importance.
- ◆ All of each person's possessions were to be given to the community upon entrance.
- ◆ The sister who led was solely responsible for redistributing goods.
- ◆ Pride in giving was to be avoided. (In this he acknowledges that sometimes fathers who placed young daughters in the community gave large amounts of monies, and also that sometimes women came with nothing, needing someone to care for them.)
- ◆ Prayer was emphasized—the oratory was to be used for prayers only, and prayers were defined as psalms and hymns.
- ◆ When fasting and eating, one was to sit in silence, listening to readings.
- ◆ Differences in accommodations were to be tolerated among the sisters if prompted by age, health, and the family gift given at entrance.
- ◆ Attire was to be simple and the hair covered, encouraging chaste minds and appearances.
- ◆ Discipline, defined as obedience to the lead sister, was to be observed, and cross looks were to be confronted one on one, then by two or three if unheeded, then by expulsion if no repentance.
- ◆ Do not wash clothes too often; bathe once a month.
- ◆ Serve in the storeroom, wardrobe, or library without grumbling.
- ◆ Check books out of the library only during stated hours.
- ◆ Do not quarrel, make up quickly, forgive without reserve—better to be quick to anger and quick to ask forgiveness than slow at both.⁴⁴

This letter, though it may reflect more of a response to specific complaints than a general rule, must give us some insight into the men's residence. Compared to what was happening in the Egyptian desert east of Hippo with Anthony and those who followed him, this was a mild asceticism. What happens at the table is central, relationships are core, and libraries and reading are an unquestioned part of the home.

⁴⁴Augustine, *Epistulae* 211.

The communities built by Augustine, by contemporary friends (including his sister), and by those imitating his community soon after were bodies of theological friends. In them the leadership of the church lived and loved, talked and thought, served and sheltered others. In the community of theological friends, matters of the formation and reformation of the soul and the church were discussed, deliberated, debated, and determined. From there came the ideas and practices that would shape not only the community and those within but the whole church. From there, a millennium later, an Augustinian monk would start the great Reformation.

DYING IN THE GRACE OF THEOLOGICAL FRIENDSHIPS

The final sounds and sights of Augustine's living and dying are heard and seen in the biography composed by Possidius, bishop of Calama. He had returned to the garden residence of his friend and would be present during his dying. So too were other bishops and priests—all friends of Augustine. Some had come because their hometowns had been burned down by the Vandals, who were sweeping across North Africa, setting up rule in Carthage, and imposing Arian alternatives in the parishes and bishoprics of the cities and desert. The last letter Possidius carried for Augustine, delivered after Augustine's death, encourages the remaining bishops to stay at their posts until all is lost. Calama already had been lost, and the old friend had come home to the residence of the bishop of Hippo—his own residence when he became a priest nearly forty years ago.

Some had come because Augustine was dying. He had a fever, and his strength was waning. Their memories of the intimate and theological conversations around the table drew them back one more time. It would be their last. The Vandals would soon burn down much of Hippo and all the bishop's beloved residence. Augustine's friends gathered at his bed and reportedly spoke together as before, agreeing on things human and divine, with kindness and love, in Christ Jesus.

Augustine had told them all earlier that he had been taught how to die by another friend and bishop whom he regularly had traveled to visit during a prolonged illness. Augustine had begged him to live longer because of his great benefit to the church and their friendship. The friend, Possidius noted, was from a small town and barely literate, but he had taught the great bishop this last grace:

“If I were never to die,” said the ailing friend of Augustine, “that would be well; but if I am to die, why not now?”⁴⁵

The time had come for Augustine. Possidius writes, “As I, by the grace of God, have lived with this man, who now is dead, on terms of intimate and delightful friendship, with no bitter disagreement, for almost forty years, may I also continue to emulate him in this world, and may I enjoy with him the promises of God Almighty in the world to come. Amen.”⁴⁶ Augustine died as he had lived—in the grace of theological friends. He was never alone.

THEOLOGICAL FRIENDSHIP TODAY

Augustine was the most personally reflective writer in the early centuries of the church, revealing his most intimate thoughts on the most public of stages. Matters of life for him were always matters of the soul and thus always matters for introspection and wonder. We have followed Augustine’s life in the context of his thinking about friends and friendships. We too would do well to think about our lives in light of the grace of theological friends.

I (Jerry) knew Augustine’s theological friends before I knew my own. Somewhat disappointed in my early exposure to contemporary theologians and theology, I set a path after seminary graduation of reading the church fathers to keep me company. I studied the ancient languages to read authors like Augustine more closely. My first church was a rural congregation and a solo pastorate, which added to my theological isolation. I do not recall a single theological conversation during these years except with my congregation, who lovingly tolerated my academic interests. I did not know until nearly halfway through my years of ministry what I lacked so thoroughly and what I hungered for so greatly. An invitation from the two other authors of this volume to join in a theological colloquium whetted my appetite for more. I have been fed and continue to feast.

Though I am perhaps introverted in temperament, my sheer joy in shared company and sustained conversation is experienced as a great grace of God in my life. I discovered that I am not alone in this need for the grace of theological friends. God gave me a calling to accompany this grace, a way of showing my gratitude—offering an invitation and affording a hospitality to others seeking

⁴⁵Possidius, *Sancti Augustini Vita Scripta a Possidius Episcopo* 109.27.

⁴⁶Possidius, *Sancti Augustini Vita Scripta a Possidius Episcopo* 145.31.

such a community. The takers are many, the conversations widening and deepening. Grace abounds.

The time I spend alone, the quiet times—just me and Jesus, just me and the psalmist, or just me and Augustine—the times I have always cherished, have been enriched profoundly by the times spent with others in mutual study and deliberation. When I pray and read and think and write alone, I am not really alone.

I wrote this chapter with the prayer that you too may come to know this grace of God. If you are like me, you may need to seek out others and be ready to accept invitations for distinctly theological engagement and have a strong bias for those relationships that have the promise of being sustained through the years. Make the glad sacrifices to sustain them. If your temperament is more extroverted, you may need to consider if the multiple interactions of your ministry and the many friendships of your life are truly theological and whether they foster thinking, if not agreeing, on things human and divine—whether they challenge you, even hold you accountable, to consider the things of God with more discipline and rigor.

Childhood friendships sustained in our adult years are precious and rare. Do you have them still? Can they be revived? Are they suitable for theological engagement? The fellow students of your college and seminary years may still be in place and can now become a continuing theological fellowship. Do not let distance or difference dissuade you. In my experience, pastors and others (writers, teachers) that have the same unspoken or acknowledged needs for theological friendships as you are nearby and waiting to be befriended. Make the contact, extend the invitation, offer hospitality. Some environments may already be in place but require a renewed refocus. Local ecumenical clergy gatherings typically do almost everything but reflect and engage theologically. Dare you suggest theological study and conversation? Denominationally based associations, also not known for theological reflection, may nonetheless be the cohort of pastors with whom lifelong theological friendships can be formed. Lead. Ask. Invite.

Gift this chapter and this book to someone whose trust and affection you share or would like to gain. Ask them to consider forming a circle of friends for the purpose of shared study and sustained conversation. Set the table. Offer barely eaten pears.

Grace is grace and thus of God. Augustine would be glad to tell us that the only work which God has promised to bless is the work of prayer. So pray. Pray for the grace of theological friends.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- ◆ Review the itinerary of your early paths. Have they been journeys with friends? What role did your earliest friends play in your thinking, speaking, and acting? Now that you are an adult, have the roles changed? Have the friends changed?
- ◆ Augustine will say, in no uncertain terms, that friendship is true only between fellow believers. Do you agree? Augustine further defines friendship as agreement in things divine and human, accompanied by kindness and affection, in Christ Jesus our Lord, who is our true peace. Do you agree? If not, what other definition would you substitute?
- ◆ Augustine and his friends in Hippo were celibate. What parts of that intentional community are attractive and available for us who are married (and with children)? The community was gender exclusive. What values would be gained and lost if our communities/friendships were gender inclusive or exclusive?
- ◆ Are you in mutually accountable friendships? What barriers are there to this in your life and ministry? How will you remove these barriers—for the sake of God, for the sake of the other, and for your sake?
- ◆ What rules, if any, could help you experience at its fullest the grace of theological friends?

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