"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. These studies, however, neglect...
Augustine’s conception of the Christian call to be a friend of God. 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 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?” Thus, the prophet knows “the story of God’s works,” because the prophets are “friends of God.”

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” (Jac. 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). 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 an unfeigned faith” (1 Tim. 1,5).

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 immortal lives have clouded their minds to the truth. See also De diversis Quaestionibus Oecumenis Tradita 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 Institute, [The Works of Saint Augustine: a Translation for the 21st Century 5,1-10], 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). 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' (Jo. 16,13).

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.

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 (invicem) of God become his friends (amicis). 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 that friendship with the world is enmity with God?" (1Jo. 4, 4). 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 Pomptilius as a friend of the demons. 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. 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". The result was that they were degraded and ultimately led to their destruction. Right relationship with God, on the other hand, ennobles the individual and draws him into the peaceful kingdom of the heavenly city. 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.'

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

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”. In this life, not only do we never see God fully as he is in himself, we also are always free 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”. It is Christ who sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts and makes us his friends. It is Christ who draws us from servitude to friendship. It is Christ who reveals the hidden things of God to us; and it is as friends of Christ that the martyrs go joyfully to their deaths. 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”. In defense of this
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. 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”. Cyprian argues that since “one 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.”

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 husband’... we see there is one person presented to us, because there is only one bride. But the synagogue of heretics is by no means one with us, because the bride is neither adulterous nor whore—hence that synagogue is unable to produce children of God.”

who take refuge in the Church from the snares of heresy should be baptized by us, who of His descension are called the friends of God”. Cited by Augustine in De Baptismo 5,18, 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 ecclesiis catholicis unitate 6, PL 4,518,10-519,7; translated by M. Bévenot, [Ancient Christian Writers 25], London 1957.

29 Epistola 59,3, CCL 3c, 479.

30 Firmilian’s letter appears as letter 75 in the catalogue of Cyprian’s 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 58,1292,49: “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 Ioannis evangelium tractatus 5,15, PL 85,1422,49. All quotations from Augustine’s Commentary on the Gospel of John presented in this essay are from John W.Retzig’s translation, [The Fathers of the Church 78, 88, 90, 92], Washington DC 1988-1995.
mathics 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.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, tr. 13,10-12, 14-15; Sermon 292,8, PL 38,1526.18.}

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 a 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.\footnote{\textit{In Ioannis evangelium tractatus} 66, PL 35,1728.52.} In this context, John proclaims that Christ is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.\footnote{Mt. 3,11; Mc. 1,8; Lc. 3,16; Io. 1,33. See \textit{In Ioannis evangelium tractatus} 6, PL 35,1498.35.} 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' (Jo. 5,25-30).

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

nastics' 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' (Jo. 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.\footnote{\textit{In Ioannis evangelium tractatus} 5,18, PL 35,1423.54.}

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".\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 5,18, PL 35,1424.11.}

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. 11,3) he said, not with me, 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' (\textit{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).\footnote{In \textit{In Ioannis evangelium tractatus} 13,12, PL 35,1498.52.}

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
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.\(^{30}\)

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.\(^{42}\) 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? Is 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 grows, God (1 Cor 3,7).\(^{39}\)

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 of the bridegroom.\(^{40}\) 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.\(^{41}\) 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" (Is. 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.\(^{42}\) 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.\(^{43}\) He stands "in the courts of the house of our God", if he stands in the charity which God has poured into his heart.\(^{44}\) He stands if he remains in the grace of Christ.\(^{45}\) He stands if in humility he drinks from the "interior fountain" of God's grace.\(^{46}\) On the other hand, those who lift themselves up in pride,

\(^{30}\) \textit{Ibid.} 5,19, PL 35,1494,18f.
\(^{40}\) Epistolae 75,14-15, CCL 5c,594.
\(^{41}\) \textit{In Ioannis evangelium tractatus} 13,13, PL 35,1499,54.
\(^{42}\) Sermon 292,8, PL 38,1526,53.

\(^{43}\) See Sermon 308A,2, PL 46,847,22, which significantly was preached on the Vespers of St. Cyprian's feast in 397.
\(^{44}\) Sermon 288,2, PL 38,1308,6f.
\(^{45}\) \textit{En. in Psalmos} 131,14, PL 97,1722,12.
\(^{46}\) \textit{Ibid.} 133,1, PL 87,1737,4.
\(^{47}\) \textit{In Ioannis evangelium tractatus} 14,2, PL 35,1503,4.
\(^{49}\) \textit{Ibid.} 25,17, PL 35,1605,49.
fall.\textsuperscript{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" (Jo. 8,44).\textsuperscript{51} One must choose, therefore, either to listen to the bridegroom or to listen to the serpent.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{54}

True pastors, by listening humbly to Christ’s voice are able to speak with his voice. They speak what they have heard.\textsuperscript{55} What they have heard is the Father’s one Word, and they speak with the voice of that Word.\textsuperscript{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

\textsuperscript{50} Sermon 292,8, PL 38,1387,1.
\textsuperscript{51} En. in Psalmos 133,1, PL 37,1787,25, Sermon 293D.3, PLS 2,596,27. In Johannis evangelium tractatus 14,2, PL 35,1563,1.
\textsuperscript{52} Sermon 179, PL 38,967,29.
\textsuperscript{53} In Johannis evangelium tractatus 18,12, PL 35,1498,48. “[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”.
\textsuperscript{54} Sermon 46, PL 38,287,18.
\textsuperscript{55} En. in Psalmos 61,19, PL 36,742,59.
\textsuperscript{56} Sermon 293D.3, PLS 2,596,22-57. 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 38,1396,34).

\textsuperscript{57} En. in Psalmos 50,13, PL 36,594,26.

\textsuperscript{58} En. in Psalmos 50,18, 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” (Fac. 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).

\textsuperscript{59} 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. 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 (Acts 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. 50

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 (Mt 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 represents Christ to the bride, 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. 51

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. 52

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 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. 53

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,
Augustine is deeply concerned to teach the faithful how to love rightly the beautiful things of creation. 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 everyday 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.