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2017

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citation for published version (APA)

Osseforth, M. H. J. G. (2017). *Friendship in Saint Augustine's Confessions: Between social convention and Christian morals*.

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Friendship in Saint Augustine's *Confessions*

Between social convention and Christian morals

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Summary

In 397 A.D. Aurelius Augustinus, *Augustine*, wrote the *Confessions*. In this book we see the bishop trying to bridge the gap between 'the two worlds' that were about to merge in his days, the pagan Roman Empire and a Christian society. As Michael McCarthy puts it: 'The *Confessions* reflects a literary space in which ancient Roman classics intermingle with the new Christian classics.'¹ And Augustine, who as professor of rhetoric at the imperial court in Milan had been at the apogee of secular ambition, and who as bishop of Hippo Regius in the Roman province of Africa was the voice of a thriving Catholic Church, seemed especially qualified to try to bridge that gap.

Of all the books Augustine wrote, the *Confessions* are arguably his most popular work. Its appeal seems to some extent to derive from the author's voice and 'dramatic' presentation of the narrative. In James O'Donnell's words: 'The opening [of the *Confessions*] can give rise to the disconcerting feeling of coming into a room and chancing upon a man speaking to someone who isn't there. He gestures in our direction and mentions us from time to time, but he never addresses his readers.'² Presented as a monologue with God as primary addressee and virtual interlocutor, the *Confessions* seem to be the most intimate place to hear Augustine's voice from up close.

Throughout the first nine books the author presents seventeen narrative episodes, which make a dramatic appeal to the reader. The subject matter of the most popular or 'iconic' of these episodes, where the author seems to call most emphatically for the reader's attention (eight out of seventeen), is friendship.³ These eight episodes, which I call key narrative episodes (KNE's) in this study, are embedded in numerous non-narrative chapters in which Augustine analyses friendship.

In view of this preponderance of the theme of friendship at what seem to be dramatic focal points in the presentation of the text, I have formulated the following principal question:

What is the function of the theme of friendship within the *Confessions* as a whole?

In order to answer this question I have formulated two complementary (and partially interrelated) subsidiary questions, one more general (How can the concept of friendship be characterized in the *Confessions*?; see subsidiary question 1 below) and

¹ McCarthy (1992: 478).

² O'Donnell (1992) on 1.1.1.

³ 1. The pear theft (2.4.9); 2. The friend who nearly turned into an enemy (4.4.7-4.7.12); 3-6. Alypius and Nebridius (6.7.11-6.10.17); 7. Firminus (7.6.8-11); 8. The garden in Milan (8.8.19-8.12.30).

one more specific (How is friendship presented in the narrative episodes in the *Confessions*?; see subsidiary question 2 below):

Subsidiary question 1: How can the concept of friendship be characterized in the *Confessions*?

To answer this first subsidiary question I have used a combined and multi-stage method. On the one hand I have made an analysis of friendship as presented in (i) two classical sources, secular (Cicero) as well as Christian (Ambrose); and (ii) modern research on the composite notion of friendship in the Augustinian corpus as a whole. This part of the research, and the overview obtained of the various components of *amicitia*, is reported in chapter 1.3.

Methodologically, this overview functions as a guiding principle for the analysis of both the narrative and the non-narrative passages of the *Confessions*, the former of which have been analysed by means of a relatively novel close-reading method (see subsidiary question 2 below).⁴ This analysis of the *Confessions* (chapter 2) comprises the body of the research. Together, the ‘model’ presented in 1.3 and the results of the analyses in chapter 2 lead to a quite specific picture of the multi-faceted concept of *amicitia* as Augustine uses it in the *Confessions* as well as of the sophisticated way in which Augustine presents the theme of *amicitia* in the narrative episodes of the work.

The analyses in chapter 2 have brought out, among other things, a set of six aspects of true friendship (*amicitia vera*) as Augustine describes it in his book (see chapter 3): *dilectio*, *benevolentia* (aiming for each other’s best interest), *vicissitudo* (influencing each other), *unitas* (complementing each other), *aequalitas* (being like each other), and *caritas* (the love of God). The first five of these I would call constitutive aspects of *amicitia*, which may have slightly different connotations in a classical and in a Christian context of friendship. As Augustine presents them in the narrative episodes of his *Confessions* (cf. subsidiary question 2 below), they may all occur together or in specific combinations, depending on the particular type of friendship he is focusing on. In general they obtain a specific, Augustinian colouring. The addition of *caritas* to the complete set, however, works as a ‘catalyst’, turning *amicitia* into *amicitia vera* (‘true friendship’).

All these aspects are qualified by what Augustine calls *continentia*, temperance and balance. This *continentia* is not a specific aspect of *amicitia*; rather, to Augustine, it is an essential aspect of the life of a Christian. The importance of *continentia* implies that, when the true balance is lost, any one of these constitutive aspects would turn from good to bad. In chapter 3.1 I give, by way of conclusion, a detailed presentation of the aspects of friendship as they come to the fore in the *Confessions*.

My analyses in chapter 2 of the presentation of friendship in the *Confessions* show how Augustine specifically adopts the classical Roman concept of *amicitia*, as presented in its most iconic form in Cicero’s *De Amicitia*, and by *imitatio* and *aemulatio* ‘Christianizes’ every aspect of it. In doing so, he turns *amicitia* into the single most important quality of the catholic Christian as a member of the Church, a veritable *sine qua non*. The Christianization of *amicitia* is complete in books 10 to 13 (which lack any narrative episodes), where *fraternitas* becomes the dominant theme. Augustine describes this *fraternitas* with reference to the same aspects he uses to characterize ‘regular’, imperfect *amicitia*; the only difference between the two is

⁴ This method has already been successfully applied by Paula Rose to Augustine’s *De Cura pro Mortuis Gerenda* (Rose 2013).

caritas. Through *caritas* mundane friendship evolves into true friendship (*vera amicitia*) which equals brotherhood, so ordinary friends become brothers in Christ. It is exactly this evolution of friendship that distinguishes Augustine's presentation of friendship from that of others. The narrative episodes in books 1–9 of the *Confessions* clearly serve to pave the way for the reader's attaining this insight, by involving him in the narrative of Augustine's own, very human journey from mundane to true friendship. This brings us to the second subsidiary question.

Subsidiary question 2: How is friendship presented in the narrative episodes in the *Confessions*?

As said, the body of research in chapter 2 focuses on the analyses of the seventeen embedded narratives, and on eight of them concerning friendship in particular, in their respective contexts. The analytic instrument I employ here is of an eclectic nature and combines insights from both discourse linguistics and narratology. The instrument has been developed by a number of classicists in Amsterdam, and incorporates elements from (i) a model of narrative structure initially developed by William Labov for natural narrative (Labov 1972), (ii) a model of linguistic discourse modes as e.g. proposed by Carlota Smith (Smith 2003), and (iii) Irene de Jong's approved model of narratology (e.g. De Jong 2014).

The instrument typically has a strong focus on discourse-linguistic devices, such as the use of tenses and the use of particles (e.g., *sed*, *nam*, *autem*, *at*, *igitur*), which reflect different principles of textual advancement and textual coherence. Attention is also paid to a separate group of particles which primarily aim for speaker authority and hearer commitment (e.g. *vero*, *modo*, *enim*, *ergo*), and might therefore be called 'conversation management particles'. Where relevant, I also discuss the rhetorical use of anaphoric pronouns, especially the pronoun *ille* as a means to indicate and emphasize the relations between referents. In chapter 1.4 I describe the details of the close-reading instrument I have employed to answer the second subsidiary question. My analyses, as presented in chapter 2, show, among other things, how the author in the narrative episodes draws the reader's attention to the narrative by means of various linguistic and narratological devices, and thus involves him, as it were, in its content. Thus, the narrative episodes enhance the drama of the discourse and the protreptic character of the *Confessions*, a protrepticus being a literary genre primarily serving as an exhortation to the study of philosophy. Cornelius Mayer, calls the *Confessions* 'a pastorally motivated protrepticus'.⁵ The addition of 'pastoral' implies the pastor's concern for the road to conversion which leads through the heart to Christ. The subject matter of the episodes are 'small scale', everyday anecdotes, which are very realistic and enable the narratee to identify with the character Augustine. Everything that had happened to him had happened by the will of God. In the *Confessions* we see man act as an instrument of God and thus, unwittingly, help others proceed towards the truth. The author makes the character Augustine accessible and imitable: Augustine was a man just like any other, and whatever had happened to him, could have happened to anyone. The *Confessions*' happy end would arouse in readers the expectation of a similar experience.

The analyses of the eight key narrative episodes have also brought out, by their character, their position (in books 2, 4, 6, 7, and 8), and their colouring of the books of which they are part, their function within the macrostructure of the *Confessions*.

⁵ Mayer (2007: 76).

These episodes seem to evoke a growing involvement of the narratee in the main discourse of the *Confessions* (one man's road to conversion) and build up tension towards what I would call the peak of the story, Augustine's conversion in the garden in Milan in book 8.

In order to answer my principal question (What is the function of the theme of friendship within the *Confessions* as a whole?), I show in this study how the particular close-reading instrument introduced in 1.4. is able, in combination with the inventory of aspects presented in 1.3, to identify the various specific aspects of friendship as they obtain in the *Confessions*. The analyses in chapter 2 thus contribute to the answer of subsidiary question 1. I also demonstrate, among other things, how the particular presentation and formulation of the key narrative episodes are to be explained in terms of (and contribute to) the protreptic character of the text as a whole (subsidiary question 2). This leads to the conclusion that friendship, as Augustine describes and presents it in the *Confessions*, illustrates the way to conversion and, at the same time, constitutes conversion's ultimate goal: to achieve, through mundane *amicitia*, true friendship which equals brotherhood as the perfect state for the Christian brethren in communion with God. And although final conversion to that state of brotherhood is, in Augustine's theology, always seen as a gift from God, as *caritas* received through the Holy Spirit, the text encourages the reader to prepare himself for that ultimate gift both by longing for it and by engaging passionately in the dynamics of friendship, just like Augustine himself did.