Friendship and Common Life

Mutual Love

Augustine was very social minded and friendly. He never wanted to be alone, and he hardly ever spent a moment of his life without friends, or blood relatives, close by him. No thinker in the early Church was so preoccupied with the nature of human relationships. Even in his youth, he formed a core of abiding friendships. He described them in a beautiful passage of his "Confessions": "All kinds of things rejoiced my soul in their company: to talk and laugh, and to do each other kindnesses; to read pleasant books together; to pass from lightest jesting to talk of the deepest things; to disagree without rancour as one might disagree with oneself, and then to season through this very rare dissension our normal agreement; to teach each other and to learn from each other; to be impatient for the return of the absent, and to welcome them with joy on their homecoming. These, and such-like things, proceeding from our hearts as we gave affection and received it back, and shown by face, by voice, by the eyes, and by a thousand other pleasing gestures, kindled a flame which "fused our souls together, and, of many, made us one." This is what he loved in his friends. He felt guilty if he did not love the person who loved him and if that love was not returned. To give love and to receive love, in short, mutual love, this is Augustine's definition of friendship. The measure of true friendship is not temporal advantage, but unselfish love, based on a similarity of character, ideas, interest, and commitment.

Limitations of human friendship

Human nature possesses two great natural goods: marriage and friendship. In another text Augustine declares that two things are essential for the human being, namely life and friendship, and both are nature's gifts. God created the human being that he or she might exist and live. But if a human person is not to remain solitary, there must be friendship. He who tries to forbid all friendly conversation must be aware that he breaks the ties of all human relationships. Faithfulness, trust, veracity, and stability are the most significant qualities of friendship. Augustine considered, however, all human things perishable, a realisation that came upon him most powerfully when one of his young friends died. The experience of the loss of this friend did not drive him into a denial of friendship, but showed him that friendship has to be based on love of God, for "he alone does not lose a beloved one, for all are beloved in God, who is not lost." But not only death can snatch a friend from our midst; human weakness and instability can also cause friendship to change into treachery, baseness, and even hatred. Therefore, Augustine seeks the basis of faithfulness and stability among friends in God and in Christ. He had become aware of the fact that Cicero's definition of friendship, "Friendship is an agreement on all human and divine things, with benevolence and love," also encompassed the domain of the divine.

Friendship in religious life

In contrast to many founders of religious communities, Augustine gave friendship an important place in the common life of the religious. He taught his young monks that they were not obliged to accept immediately everyone in friendship, but that it should be their wish to accept everyone as a friend. Their attitude

toward others should be such that the possibility of taking them into their friendship remains open. Although we never will succeed in penetrating fully another's innermost self, he called our attention to the fact that "Nobody can truly be known, except through friendship." And when his monks asked him when they could call another a friend, he answered: "We can consider another person as a friend, if we dare to entrust to him or her all our innermost thoughts." He also saw friendship as a help and consolation for himself, describing his monastic experience as follows: "I admit that readily throw myself entirely on the love of my most intimate friends, especially when I am wearied with the world's scandals, and I find rest in that love, free of anxiety. This is because I feel that God, upon whom I cast myself without fear, and in whom I find secure rest, is present there. In this security of mine, I do not fear the uncertainty of tomorrow and of human weakness. What ideas and thoughts I entrust to a human being who is full of Christian charity, and has become for me a faithful friend, I do not entrust to a human being, but to God, in whom this person abides, and who made him or her a faithful friend."

Influence

In Western Europe, particularly in England and Northern France, Augustine's ideas on friendship had a strong influence on medieval Cluniac-Cistercian religious life, especially on Peter the Venerable, Bernard of Clairvaux, Aelred of Rievaulx, and Peter of Celle. It was only during the fifteenth century, apparently, that there came a flight from friendship because of the conviction that friendship among religious would undermine the integrity of life in religious community.