

CHRISTIAN
FRIENDSHIP IN THE
FOURTH CENTURY

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The theme of this book is friendship, an area of ethics which is not of central concern nowadays, especially when regarded as a relationship of affection between members of the same sex.¹ And although it may in some form still have a part in our everyday lives, possibly offering a pleasant means of passing our spare time, we do not tend to regard it as something to which definite rules of conduct apply. Family relations have taken centre stage in our society and friendship has consequently moved into the wings. The modern view of friendship has little in common with that held in antiquity, even if occasionally, in literary writings, we may find sentiments expressed about friendship which seem to conform to generally accepted ideas on the subject, handed on through the ages and discovered anew to be accurate by each generation of articulate people, as when Charlotte Brontë writes in a letter of 1 March 1847, 'To keep friendship in proper order, the balance of good offices must be preserved, otherwise a disquieting and anxious feeling creeps in, and destroys mutual comfort.' But in general it is not a topic about which we theorise or which is regarded as demanding or problematic.²

It may then seem surprising that it should have been such a popular topic and so highly valued in Greece and Rome and even more surprising that it should have been regarded as important within Christianity. In showing in what ways this was true, I aim to consider friendship primarily from a theoretical point of view rather than from the perspective of biography, social history or politics, though the book will inevitably touch on these areas as well as on early Christian

theology: its aim is to describe and compare the ideas about friendship developed in antiquity, first by writers and thinkers of pagan culture and then by the Christians whose culture was in many ways dependent on its pagan background,³ while differing radically from it in other respects. In outlining the Classical theories my concern will be not primarily with political friendships, with the question of alliances and patronage, but rather with philosophical discussions and pronouncements and popular expressions of the nature and value of friendship.

With regard to the Christian writers of the fourth century, their theories will be considered in the context of their personal lives, where relevant, and also in the context of their relations with one another, for there is usually a correlation between the theory held by an individual and his personality and experience. All the writers considered here were men of great stature and influence on later ages as well as on their own period, deeply involved as they often were in current political and ecclesiastical affairs from the vantage point of high office, at least at some stage in their lives: such involvement meant that they were people of 'high profile' who were looked to for advice by many others from all parts of the Roman Empire. Furthermore, the fact that at this stage the Christian Church still felt itself under some threat from pagans and heretics and was spending much effort on consolidation and extension meant that orthodox Christians in positions of responsibility felt the need to communicate with one another to discuss various problems, to chastise⁴ and encourage, and to canvas support for their cause. These circumstances provided a fertile field for the growth of alliances which were often regarded as sufficiently intimate and personal to merit the name of friendship.

But why should one consider the theories of Christians in the late fourth century and early fifth century in preference to other periods? To be sure, these are years of enormous interest that witness the development of the Church from a persecuted sect before the accession of Constantine to a tolerated, even favoured, creed under Constantine in the first half of the

century, to the official religion under Theodosius at the end of the century, a religion in power which was to dominate Western civilisation at least for the next millennium. The voices of more and more Christians are to be heard as Christianity takes its place at the centre of the contemporary culture, and yet the influence of Classical civilisation is still very strong, a source of pride as well as a cause of conflict. Each Christian, and the Church as an instrument of power, must come to terms with this heritage which had much to offer that was admirable as well as much that had to be condemned. This was also the crucial period when the members of the intelligentsia were being converted to Christianity in greater numbers than ever before, a fact which would inevitably influence the way the Christian religion presented itself to the world, as well as affecting the concerns and outlook of many Church leaders.⁵

But more specifically, it seems that in the fourth century, despite the problems of compatibility between Christianity and the traditional theories of friendship (which will be considered in chapter 3), Christians began to consider the subject in more serious and positive terms than heretofore. It is true that the traditional views peer forth occasionally in the writings of some earlier Christians who had been educated to a high standard in pagan literature and thought: in the second century Clement of Alexandria referred to the proverb 'Friends hold all things in common' and to the theory of three kinds of friendship in his *Stromateis* (2.19), as well as mentioning pagan usages of the concept of friendship (4.3). In the work *Quis dives salvetur* he observed that friendships need a long time to develop, an idea frequently found in pagan writings. In about 200 A.D. the Christian apologist Minucius Felix wrote of his friendship with Octavius in the eponymous dialogue, 'In our moments of relaxation as well as in times of seriousness, we had been in complete harmony together with but a single will; you might have said of us that we had one mind shared between us' (1.3), while he later refers to a Classical proverb when he writes (4.6), 'Friendship always either finds or makes equals'.⁶ However, these ideas are not developed and at this early Christian period

the terminology of friendship is usually used of the relations between God and man rather than of the purely human relationship.

It is not until the fourth century that friendship began to play an important part in the lives and thought of Christians.⁷ It is indeed striking to see how often friendship is praised in the writings of those Christians who had an important part to play in the development of orthodox Christian theology at this crucial time in the Church's history, the golden age of patristic thought. In facing the challenge of bringing the Church to maturity, these men, the majority of whom had been highly educated in the academic capitals of the Roman Empire – Athens, Alexandria, Antioch and Rome – were often able to put their knowledge of Classical philosophy and literature to good use,⁸ for although they were critical of their cultural heritage, they saw, in varying degrees, that it could not be wholly rejected. As part of this, they recognised that certain characteristics of the ideal pagan friendship, such as spiritual unity and harmony of interest, reciprocity and sharing, could accord with Christian ideals and even be developed further within a Christian context. This book aims to show the variety of ways in which some of the Christians of late antiquity assimilated the ideas worked out by their Greek and Roman forbears.

Another factor which could be said to have favoured a rekindling of interest in the concept of friendship at this period was the new social status of Christianity which had spread to all parts of the Empire. People could thus feel that wherever they lived, whether in what is now the Middle East or in Germany, whether in North Africa or in Turkey, they were bound together by a common faith. Christians were no longer merely members of individual, isolated churches but of one Church under the emperor's patronage, ideally forming a harmonious unity, were it not for the difficulty of establishing what was heterodox and suppressing it. Moreover, the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the time was also conducive to the formation of friendships all over the Empire, with people often making friends during their student days when they came together

from different countries, friendships which they managed to maintain for many years after, even when separated by great distances on return to their homeland or on appointment to some administrative post in whatever corner of the Empire.

These particular circumstances meant that letters were of enormous value in communication and in maintaining links between fellow Christians. As the Church was now a vast network of interrelating communities, each represented by a bishop who had a very important part to play in ecclesiastical politics and in theological matters, letters as well as prayer were essential for maintaining the unity of the Church in these difficult times.⁹ The problems of meeting one's friend and the advantages of epistolary communication are well expressed by Paulinus of Nola in a letter to Pammachius (Ep. 13.2) when he writes:

Writing was the only way by which I could make the journey to your holy and loving person. I could not put the same limits on my mind as on my body; for the flesh is always weak and refused to be transported too far in winter, whereas the spirit, always more willing, flew to you in fervent longing so that though I did not embrace you in person, I was able to do so in mind.¹⁰

Of course, these letters, concerned most often with theological controversies or with details of the Church's organisation as an institution, did not have to include a personal element, and sometimes such an element is indeed lacking. But the majority of the vast output of letters at this period, especially when addressed to individuals, did contain some form of appeal to friendship and human affection, based on common faith in Christ and the bond of Christ's love which characterised Christian friendships. Another characteristic of these letters is that they are of a literary nature, usually elegantly expressed and studded with Classical and Biblical quotations, as we might expect from men educated according to the traditional values and probably conversant with the theories of literary letter-writing.¹¹ Although some of these writers were unable ever to meet, they managed to maintain a correspondence over many years and developed an intimate spiritual and intellectual relationship by this prolonged association, as in the case of

Augustine and Jerome – though this relationship was not without its vicissitudes!

Correspondence by letter undoubtedly presented many problems at this time and it is clear that it was not easy to keep up a friendship in this way: letters often went astray *en route* or the difficulty of procuring trusty messengers, especially during the winter months when travel was dangerous and restricted, caused letters to be long delayed in reaching their destination.¹² In the spring of 371, from Caesarea in what is now central Turkey, Basil writes to his friend Eusebius, bishop of Samosata (Samsat), an important city on the Euphrates some 150 miles to the south-east, excusing himself for his delay in writing:

We have had great difficulty in obtaining a carrier for our letter to you, because in our land people so shudder at the winter that they cannot bring themselves even to put their heads out of their houses for a moment. Indeed, we have been overwhelmed with such a mass of snow that for two months now we have been lurking in our burrows, buried with our very houses.¹³

Sometimes the letters would be entrusted to a friend to be delivered to another friend, in which cases the actual letter was often no more than a brief note, for it was expected that the messenger, as a trusted friend, would be able to give all the news by word of mouth.¹⁴ In Ep.27 Paulinus writes of his joy at the personal message and the news of his friend conveyed to him at Nola by the messengers by word of mouth. He tells Severus, 'I cannot express the pleasure with which they filled me as they recounted your activities and words and told me of your heart made perfect by knowledge of the divine love.' Paulinus also clearly regards the messenger as important in forming a link between the two friends, as Victor does between Paulinus and Severus: 'Victor is our joint pledge of affection', writes Paulinus in Ep.28, 'our faithful attendant, our regular consolation. Victor is mine in you and yours in me.'

Such facts provide a salutary reminder of the problems involved in drawing conclusions about friendship from the available evidence: the many letters which survive presumably represent only a small fraction of the complete picture of Christian friendship at this period. Not only are many lost, but

we have little record of the friendships between men living in the same place who would not be so dependent on letters for the maintenance of their relationship of which there may consequently be no written record. But although our knowledge of both theory and practice of friendship is limited to the evidence provided by the letters and theological works of a few eminent Christians, these do nevertheless offer a fascinating insight into the network of friendly relations formed by a number of the leading figures in the Christian Church, whether within the Church hierarchy or in the ascetic movement, and covering the whole Mediterranean area, from Ambrose in Milan to Basil in Cappadocia, from Paulinus in Campania to Jerome at Bethlehem. And did not Cassian meet John Chrysostom in Constantinople before moving to the West, Augustine meet Ambrose in Milan before returning to North Africa and Jerome meet Pammachius in Rome before retiring to Bethlehem?

Despite the problems involved in letter-writing it is evident that all these men regarded letters as invaluable both for providing information about important events in different parts of the Empire and for maintaining affectionate spiritual relationships: a letter could treat both of theological questions or Church business and more personal matters such as spiritual development and affectionate feelings. On the personal level letters and other writings were considered to enable friends to know one another without meeting. In Ep.40 to Jerome, Augustine argues wittily:

For if the reason I do not know you is that I have not seen your actual face, then by the same argument you do not know yourself, for you do not see it either. But if you are only known to yourself because you know your own mind, then I too know it quite well through your writings and I bless the Lord for giving a man of your calibre to yourself, to me and to all the brothers who read your works.

Basil often¹⁵ praises the ability of letters to reveal the writer's soul and Paulinus writes to his dear friend Pammachius in Ep. 13 that a man's words are the mirror of his mind,¹⁶ applying the idea of the Classical proverb that the face is the mirror of the soul to a situation which could be relevant also for the many times when you were unable to see your friend's face. For letters

could, it was felt, make the absent one present to his friend – and here the Fathers were keeping alive a belief which had been formulated by many Classical writers on epistolary theory and had appeared in personal letters, too, as in those of Cicero.¹⁷ Jerome writes that letters allow friends to be present to each other ‘in love and in spirit’ while Ambrose expresses this popular idea in writing to his friend Sabinus: his *Ep.*49 (26) opens on this deeply personal note:

Since our practice of writing letters gives you pleasure, too, so that those who are far apart indulge in conversation as though they were near, I shall continue often to address my writings to you, even when I am alone. For I am never less alone than when I seem to be so, nor less at leisure than when I am at leisure. Then, at least, I can summon at will whomever I wish to and I can bring to my side those whom I love more dearly or whom I consider more suited to me. No one speaks, no one interrupts our talk. Then do I have you closer to me and then I can talk about the Scriptures and we can chat together at great length.

More generally, letters were useful as proofs of affection and as providing evidence of spiritual development. Paulinus writes to Aper in *Ep.*38, begging him to write again, ‘so I may simultaneously obtain the consolation of love and joy, when by reading your letter I shall see that you are mindful of me in your holy dealings with God and attentive to yourself in the progress of your spiritual knowledge and in the understanding of your heart which yearns for God’. Letters were not regarded as merely a means of transmitting news – and this was the view of pagans such as Symmachus as well as of Christians.¹⁸

And yet in more despondent moments it was felt that letters were only a second best, unable to provide an adequate substitute for a friend’s physical presence and conversation. Often the writers of these letters express their intense longing to see their friends¹⁹ which is not surprising considering the frustrations of correspondence and the fact that many of them lived in isolated regions, far from like-minded people. Such expressions may be common but they are not therefore mere clichés: at such points personal human feelings are very much to the fore, pushing theory into the background.

The growth of interest in the possibilities of friendship on a personal, ecclesiastical and theological level may also be connected with the growth of the ascetic movement which was regarded by some as offering the ideal Christian life, by others as a threat to the Church and by many pagans as worthy of scorn and disgust.²⁰ It is certainly the case that it encouraged a radical break with secular society and with ties of kinship, thus liberating men and women from, amongst other things, the concerns and responsibilities of marriage and the education of children and allowing them to form other human relationships according to different values. Did not Augustine feel that in order to devote himself whole-heartedly to Christianity, he must renounce his career as an orator as well as his desire to marry? For him and most of his friends, as for many at this period, a genuine Christian could not continue to live in the world once the decision to dedicate himself to Christ had been made. But their natural affections could then be channelled into relationships based primarily on a shared devotion to Christ rather than on any kind of secular or sexual concerns. It is significant that such intimate Christian friendships were to thrive throughout the Middle Ages primarily within monasticism which offers us plentiful documentary evidence of affectionate relationships, mostly in the form of letters but also in more theoretical works such as the dialogue on spiritual friendship by the twelfth-century Cistercian, Aelred of Rievaulx. Indeed, the Middle Ages are generally considered to be the time of the flowering of Christian friendship, with much play made of the extravagant language used by the monks in their expressions of devotion to one another.²¹ And yet medieval monasticism is greatly indebted to the exciting and far-reaching ideas developed by the Church Fathers of the fourth century in this respect as in so many, for it was among these earlier Christians, educated within the traditional pagan system but often opting for an ascetic life on rigorously Christian tenets, that coherent theories of Christian friendship were first worked out.

The formation of groups of ascetically minded men and women, strictly separated from each other, obviously encour-

aged friendships between members of the same sex, but friendships between men and women were also possible though there is unfortunately far less evidence for them. The question of exactly how far they were possible is part of the much wider question of the relations between the sexes within the Church in late antiquity, some aspects of which have been expansively treated by Peter Brown in his book *The Body and Society*. Particular aspects will be considered in association with the friendships between Jerome and the circle of ascetic aristocratic women at Rome and between John Chrysostom and Olympias in the Eastern capital, Constantinople, as well as between Paulinus and his wife Therasia. Although there are instances of close spiritual relationships between members of the opposite sex, it remains true that the men of this period were very severe on women, not only in their theoretical writings but also in practice. In most of his writings Augustine, for example, refused to allow women anything but a procreative role in relation to men and in the *De Genesi ad litteram* (9.5.9) he admits that he does not believe that Eve could have been created primarily to be Adam's companion for 'how much better would two male friends live together, alike for company and conversation, than a man and a woman'.²² Jerome's harsh ideal of women recurs with greater regularity in his writings than almost any other theme – most frequently expressed in letters addressed to women – and it was only by dint of living up to this ideal to an amazing degree that his own close female friends were able to maintain a relationship with him. In the case of Augustine, after his conversion he was very strict with himself and with those around him when it came to personal meetings with women – these men would not allow themselves to indulge in relaxed *lête-à-lêtes* alone with women of any kind, especially outside their immediate family.²³ They were very wary of the temptations of sexual desire which they felt they might fall victim to at any moment. This prevented them being more open to the possibilities of friendships between men and women even within marriage, although such relationships were regarded as possible, and admirable, if both husband and wife agreed to live in continence. Such caution meant that the

closest relationships between ascetic Christians of the opposite sex were predominantly between members of the same family: Monica's extraordinary closeness to her son Augustine is well-known, but other instances of female influence on the men to be considered in this book are Therasia's on her husband Paulinus and that of Macrina (another saint in her own right) on her brother Basil – all women who encouraged the men close to them to dedicate themselves to Christ and adopt a more or less ascetic life.

In the light of the fact that it was regarded as possible, if difficult, for a married couple to renounce their sexual desires and obligations and to continue to live together in a close spiritual relationship, it is perhaps surprising to find such unequivocal condemnation among these Christian writers of those relationships which, it seems, had been quite common within the Church for a couple of centuries²⁴ and which, one might think, would qualify as Christian friendships between the sexes. This was the practice which appears to have developed at a time when the Church was less highly organised and there were not monastic communities for men or women to join members of their own sex in an ascetic life, whereby a man and woman (always portrayed as a young and attractive virgin in the polemical literature) decided to live together in perfect chastity and devotion to Christ. Although the polemicists such as Jerome (who was himself accused of having a not wholly innocent friendship with Paula at Rome, though he protests that he never even saw her eating²⁵) and John Chrysostom admit that such couples may have been able to maintain their vow of chastity despite the temptations occasioned by such intimacy,²⁶ the main objection seems to have been that they would bring scandal on the Church. It was hard to believe that their motive for such an intimate relationship was anything but lust, whether conscious or unconscious, at least on the part of the man, and ostentation on the part of the woman. Although the defence is countenanced that the man needs the woman's practical domestic help and the woman, in her weakness, needs a man's support, it is never suggested that companionship and shared ideals might be the motives. John Chrysostom, in

addressing such women, pours scorn on the idea that they need a man's protection. Surely if they can help the men, they can also help themselves or one another – why not live chastely with other women? And in his work written to persuade men not to enter into such relationships, Chrysostom gives the reason why he will not allow them but will admit that a chaste Christian friendship can exist between husband and wife: the difference is that a virgin will remain a sexual temptation for much longer while a chaste friendship can only develop once the strains of child-bearing and child-rearing have rendered the wife physically exhausted and unattractive!

In conclusion: it may be true that many similarities will be seen, both between the pagan and Christian and between Christian and Christian at this period in their attitude to friendship; and yet it is certainly not the case, as I hope this book will show, that the experiences of friendship of those considered here, and their views and theories on the subject were uniform or lacking in individuality and personal feeling. Without disregarding individual variations, we can only say that, both as committed Christians and as Christians with a strong sympathy for the philosophy and literature of the past, each of them would have recognised to some degree the experience of friendship in God described thus by the product of a very different Christian world, the American Quaker Thomas Kelly who, like them, sees it as an attempt to reproduce the life of the early Christians and to prefigure the heavenly life to come:

When we are drowned in the overwhelming seas of the love of God, we find ourselves in a new and particular relation to a few of our fellows. The relation is so surprising and so rich that we despair of finding a word glorious enough and weighty enough to name it. The word 'fellowship' is discovered, but the word is pale and thin in comparison with the rich volume and luminous bulk and warmth of the experience which it would designate. For a new kind of life-sharing and of love has arisen of which we had only dim hints before. Are these the bonds which knit together the early Christians, the very warp and woof of the Kingdom of God?²⁷