

Friendship (Philia), as Methodology in Christian Education

Benedict VESA

“Babeş-Bolyai” University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Abstract: *This paper addresses, from an analytical perspective, the concept of “friendship”, as methodology in Christian education, stemming from the elements of Scripture present in the Gospel. Christ uses personal example as a real, tangible, obvious and easy element, meant to challenge and support with arguments behavioural changes through modelling (after the model of the one standing in front), and everyone is invited to appreciate, respect and love one another. Jesus Christ is the teacher par excellence, and his methodology implies the cultivation of friendships. From a pragmatic perspective, he sees everybody as friends, regardless of the potentialities that each might have, of social status or used resources. Love as strong feeling of affection, attraction and union between people takes on more hypostases, of which the agape- is the expression of complete love, devoid of selfishness, with the capacity to continuously offer, without asking for anything else in exchange, it is the model of Christic love; being a love of action, which implies unconditional support, compassion for the other, and is consumed as an attitude, a spiritually motivated behaviour and unrestrained in feelings.*

Keywords: friendship, love, Christian education, modelling.

Introduction

From a theological perspective, ownership and sovereignty of word are characteristics that may obviously only be attributed to the Incarnate Logos, in whose case there is no distancing, no syncope nor disparities between His identity, word and work¹. The Logos/ Verbum is spoken and becomes reality following the model „let there be” and so it was. For this reason, His word is truth (John 14:6), and not in the sense of an ethical or aesthetic category, but an ontological one, being the same as life and the only meaning of life.

In this line, in a horizontal context, man is a liar, and this happens not because he intends to avoid the truth, but because he does not hold the truth in any absolute sense, and he is merely trying to live it, to „borrow” by „attaching” it to the unique Truth. This way, man may become more authentic, more real, as continuity in life, word and fact stands as truth criterion.

Christian education accomplished through modelling

With reference to education, it may be asserted that the sole real Teacher, the only one who does not lie is Christ-the Pedagogue², from beginning to end. His „methodology” is not similar to, nor is it comparable to any other approach, but rather it is a complete novelty: „*The guards replied „Never [at any time] has a man talked the way this Man talks!*” (John 7: 46). And

¹ G. Remete, „Osemintele lui Iisus saumormântul lui Hristos”, in *Studii Teologice* I (2007), p. 216-217.

² See: Clement Alexandrinul, *Pedagogul*, Bucharest, EIBMBOR, 1982.

this element of novelty is indicated by the holistic character of Word and its identification with life itself: „*The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life*” (John 6: 63) Hence, their eternal character: „*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away*” (Matthew 24: 35; Mark 13: 31; Luke 21: 33).

From a theological viewpoint, education as sharing of/from truth implies the continuation of content, language and methodology. The most classical example in this respect is Saint John the Baptist, who calls himself „the voice of the word”: „*I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said.*” (John 1: 23; Matthew 3: 3; Mark 1: 3; Luke 3: 4). This reveals the continuation of the message and methodology. Similar to the One whom John the Baptist was announcing, he synthesises his sermon in the call to repentance- „*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*” (Matthew 3: 2). The same call may be found in Christ’s sermon: „*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”*” (Matthew 4: 17). Under these circumstance, John the Baptist calls himself the „bridegroom’s friend”- „*He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled.*” (John 3: 29)- suggesting thus, at symbolic level, a possible methodology in theological formation, firstly, and in the educational process, in general.

The three years spent by disciples around the Lord Jesus Christ, „*Rabbi-the Teacher*”, may be considered as authentic schooling, focused on the question-answer model, without anything being delivered as gratuitous, unnatural, unnecessary, and everything being contextualised, called for by urgent situations and with rapid solutions. At the same time, there are numerous open-end examples, both from the spiritual perspective and the psychological one, and they are of utmost importance, leaving room to personal participation in the sense of identifying and creating a specific itinerary together. In theology, this principle is called synergy, a principle that is also found in psychology. In the area of pedagogy, the term itself that names this field makes reference to that guidance meant to identify an itinerary together.

The disciples were listeners and witnesses to Christ’s sermons, and, at the same time, they were main actors in various situations He created. They asked questions, they were challenged, had to take a stand and learn – „*Learn from me...*” (Matthew 11:29). There are two conditions that Christ pointed out for the lucrative methodology—to put into practice what they had seen Him doing („*You are witnesses^(a) of these things*” / Luke 24: 48) and the power above, as permanent shadow and accompaniment from God (no space “*I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.*” / Luke 24: 49) We are dealing with an inclusive study program, having a holistic character and practising a „transdisciplinary methodology”. The following examinations meant gestures and attitudes to

be used when facing situations similar to those they had experiences during their apprenticeship- „*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” (Matthew 28: 19-20)

Linguistic excursus

Before tackling the core of the problem, we shall make a short linguistic digression. In Greek there are four terms that are used to designate the love relation between God and man and the one between men, in general. In an ascending hierarchy, we shall start with the term “Eros”, frequently used in reference to carnal love, with physical, even sensual³ connotations. This primary form is at the basis of biological life and is the one deemed to be “most obligatory”, in the sense that human life begins with this act.

It is in within this succession that the second form occurs, “storge”, translated as “affection”. This form marks the love relationship between parents and children. It is necessary/mandatory, even if to a lesser extent that the previous one, but it is also gift-love, namely, it is free. It is „mandatory” in the sense in which the parent shares this quality precisely because he/she loves his/her child. This is also the reason why the child was brought to life. In the same manner, the child has the “duty “of loving his/ her parents, because they represent the origin of his/ her life. But, at the same time, this love also needs to be won, as a parent cannot demand to be loved for the mere fact that he/she has given life. Being a parent is a state, as well as a process, and it is acquired on a permanent basis, just as it must be continuously “conquered”. A child cannot simply be forced to love his parents on grounds that they had given him life, but also because parents continue to be/become parents, by means of renewing and dynamic attitudes that they use to exercise this state of being. It is precisely for this reason that this form of love is superior to the other one, having both a necessary character and, at the same time, inviting towards dynamism and freedom, towards giving.

“Philia” stands as the third form and describes the friend relationship. If the two other forms were at least partially necessary/mandatory, friendship is the freest and of choice. Regardless of how much one might hate his parents, the evidence of his origin makes him acknowledge the “dependence” and “the potential gratitude” towards those who had given him life, a relationship described by the previous two forms. But, without friends, anyone may live and cross their life, beyond the lack of happiness he might

³ Even if, in mystical context, the term is used to name the momentum of meeting God, the dynamic and active part of the itinerary.

choose. Friendship is the freest and most devoid of strings form of human love, and therefore, the one that is "not necessary", not obligatory. If in the case of the first two, partners are face to face, looking into each other's eyes and sharing joy, this time, they stand side by side and they look forward, sharing the same purposes and taking similar methodologies. The line that characterises their actions is: "What? You as well? I thought I was the only one..."⁴

This final form of love is only surpassed by the love of God charity – "agape", which is an "infusion", coming from the outside and destined to man. If up until Christ, man was called to love God with all his heart (Deuteronomy 6: 5), and his neighbour as himself (Leviticus 19: 18), from then on, the measure of love has increased, inviting towards loving one's neighbour at the same scale that Christ Himself loved/loves man, which was clearly states by Jesus Christ: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." (John 13: 34) This form of love expands even to loving one's enemies and the consciousness of unity with the whole people as one, similar to Christ: "The second commandment: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.', replenishes human nature as one being, shattered through sin, until the point where all the fullness of being human reaches into the possession of each human person...another way of being, in its last transformation, makes that each human person, in virtue of the wholeness spent in man's doctrinal union, must become bearer of the entire being of human fullness, thus equal to the entire humankind, equal to the Unique Man(acc. to Genesis. 1:26), in the image of the Perfect Man – Christ, who carries within Man as a whole being"⁵.

The concept of "friendship" in John 15

After this extended introduction, we shall focus our analysis on the concept of „friendship”, as methodology in Christian education, stemming from the elements of Scripture that are present in the Gospel and, especially in the Johannine version, chapter 15. It must be stated in the first place that the term "friendship" occurs 256 times in the entire Holy Scripture, 32 times in the New Testament, of which 25 such occurrences are in reference to Christ. The relation "Christ-Rabbi" and disciples is described as friendship. In chapter 15 of the Gospel of John, there is a succession of elements that seems to describe this methodology. We will indicate the Greek text, by pointing out the elements that are relevant to this research and analyse them accordingly.

Verse 12: *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.* (αὐτῆ ἐστὶν ἡ ἐντολὴ ἧ ἐμὴ, ἵνα ἀγαπᾶτε ἀλλήλους καθὼς ἠγάπησα ὑμᾶς).

⁴ For details see: C. S Lewis *Despre minuni. Cele patru iubiri. Problema durerii*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2012, p. 278.

⁵ *Nașterea întru împărăția cea Neclătită*, Alba Iulia, Reîntregirea, 2003, p. 74-75.

Any training endeavour starts from the attitude of the Teacher, as he is the one to love first of all. It begins freely, devoid of biases, in the line of his vocation, with equal attention to all and with the intention to communicate. He does not make any pre-established hierarchies, but rather, he gives full credit to those who stand in front of him, cherishing them and even sharing love (ἠγάπησα ὑμᾶς). And learners, following the model of he who stands ahead, are invited to appreciate, respect and love one another (ἀγαπᾶτε ἀλλήλους). The love of disciples takes place along the lines of their teacher's love. The best education is completed by means of setting an example, and the feeling that their teacher, without having previously known them, cherishes, pays attention to, and loves them from the very beginning, turns, in the eyes of disciples, into safety and motivation for the study they plan to initiate.

The next verse (13) shows the measure of love that the teacher reveals „No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.” (μείζονα ταύτης ἀγάπην οὐδεὶς ἔχει, ἵνα τις τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ θῆῃ ὑπὲρ τῶν φίλων αὐτοῦ). Christ uses here the term “friend (φίλος)” to describe His love for the disciples, and the measure of this friendship is sacrifice. Translated and extended as pedagogic principle, this confession indicates the teacher's capacity to sacrifice himself for his disciples, the intention and strength to step back, for their sake, to make room for them, to give up his own comfort zone and any commercial act of self-satisfaction or self-glorification-“*He must increase, but I must decrease*” (John 3:30). The teacher begins to live through his disciples and this does not imply a diminishing of his personality, as it may be perceived, but rather, an extension of love, not horizontally, nor quantitatively, but vertically and qualitatively. As “his children” grew up, a personal increase appeared within Him as well, but it is inward, invisible and yet real and intense.

In verse 14, he calls his disciples „friends”, uttering nonetheless a condition- obedience, which stands as their affirmative answer to the calling he makes: „*You are my friends if you do what I command you*” (ὕμεις φίλοι μου ἐστε ἐὰν ποιῆτε ἃ ἐγὼ ἐντέλλομαι ὑμῖν). Friendship implies communication, reciprocity, the synergy that was above-mentioned. It is a circular energy that provides content and dynamism to the relation. The imposed condition does not mean that love is conditioned, but merely that the efficiency of work can only occur in the case of positive feedback. In any training process, in order for results to be visible, there is a need to communicate and participate, otherwise, beyond the teacher's exceptional qualities, the disciple's interest and active participation is a fundamental condition for the educative process to be carried out rightly.

Verse 15 places the disciples in a superior state, nearly equal to that of their teacher. The relationship takes place at „partnership” level: “*I do not call you servants^[d] any longer, because the servant^[e] does not know what the master is doing; but*

I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father". (οὐκ ἐτίλεγω ὑμᾶς δούλους, ὅτι ὁ δοῦλος οὐ κοιᾷ δὲ ἐν τῷ ποιῆσαι αὐτοῦ ὁ κύριος· ὑμᾶς δὲ εἴρηκα φίλους, ὅτι πάντα ἀήκουσα παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς μου ἐγνώρισά ὑμῖν). This partnership takes place in virtue of honesty and accurate communication. The teacher not only delivers data, he doesn't simply inform, but rather, there is communication, giving and in this way, the separation, distance between educator and learner are cancelled.

All the heritage, tradition (received from the Father) are transmitted to the next generations with generosity and personally. The transmission of information, teachings, skills etc. represent the very content of the educational act. This continuity is described and accomplished through the friendship between trainer and trainees, master and disciples, and eventually, the connection between generations is achieved. It is precisely the personal and contextual manner in which this process is carried out that makes the disjunction between generations, that apparently insurmountable hiatus. The text becomes context through friendship, not as ethical circumstance, but as existential relationship, one that develops man.

The final verse (16) in the succession under our analysis makes reference to choice, vocation: "*You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.*" The choice does not simply come on behalf of disciples, but rather, on behalf of the teacher himself, from the exact moment of accepting his vocation. Generations of formed learners enter this succession of permanent choice and work. The fruit of the disciples becomes his own, by becoming validated and confirmed in this calling. It is he who allows for tradition, information, methods, contents to be accessible on a permanent basis, in a personal manner, and not as mere library resources. This represents the key moment when the dynamic and always living character of the educational⁶ process is intuited.

Application

Christ is the teacher par excellence, and His methodology implies the building of friendship. He sees everybody as potential friends, regardless of their heritage, social status, attitude or resources. This happens because Christ works beyond time, forgiving the past and investing into the present, while confidently looking towards the future. But beyond time, Christ sees man in his initial potential and in the possible dynamism of his evolution. This is why he „invests” with enthusiasm, generosity and complete trust. Everyone is a potential „friend” of His, even or especially, tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 11: 19; Luke 7: 34), even Judas Iscariot (Matthew 26: 50).

⁶ For a detailed exegesis, also see Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *Comentariu la Evangheliadupa Ioan*, *Scriseri*, Bucharest, EIBMBOR, 2000, p. 951-958.

His hope and love go hand in hand until the end – “*Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.* (εἰς τέλος ἠγάπησεν αὐτούς)” (John 13:1).

This aspect is also indicated by the dialogue with Peter, after the Resurrection. By inviting Peter to join His love, Christ asks him three times regarding his readiness to love. If in the first two situations, the Lord invites him to the Divine love by using the verb “*agapein*” (ἀγαπήσαμε), Peter answers each time in another register, by making use of the verb „*philein*” (φιλήσῃ). For this reason, the third time, Christ Himself changes the register, accepting the leniency that Peter asked for, and invites him to restore their friendship, which he thought he they had lost because of his betrayal, and uses this time Peter’s verb “*philein*” (φιλήσαμε). And Peter, satisfied by the jointly created context, replies clearly and more courageously than the previous two times: “*Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.* (φιλήσῃ)” (John 21:17)⁷. It is the calling that becomes universal. Christ, the absolute Teacher, calls His disciples to join His friendship and offers them everything, but, more importantly, He offers Himself to them. This way, Church itself is a calling to the embodiment of friendship, as it is the place where the genesis/birth into this state takes place, and the work that occurs here is precisely friendship being embraced: “*Peace to you. The friends send you their greetings. Greet the friends there, each by name.* (εἰρήνησοι. ἀσπάζονται σε οἱ φίλοι. ἀσπάζου τοὺς φίλους κατ’ ὄνομα.)” (3mJohn 1: 15).

⁷ Also see Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *Comentariu la Evanghelia după Ioan*, p. 1179-1180.

"Friendship (Philia), as Methodology in Christian Education," *Astra Salvensis*, VII
(2019), no. 14, p. 147-153