

Ambrose of Milan and the limits of Christian friendship

Ambrose's *De officiis* is a notoriously understudied work. Since recent scholarship has largely focused on the literary dependence of the treatise upon Cicero's same-titled work, the novelty of its message has not quite been understood (Davidson 2001: 45-64). This observation is not only true with regard to the work as a whole but also applies to the study of friendship, a theme that features prominently in the final chapters of book three (Ambr. Offic. 3.125-138). In this passage, Ambrose draws on two Ciceronian texts in order to forge a decidedly Christian view on friendship: whereas the late Republican model of *De officiis* provided the starting point for a lengthy discussion of the topic, it was Cicero's *Laelius* that offered valuable material to further substantiate the bishop's argument.

Some scholars have argued that in this closing passage Ambrose subtly transforms the Republican conception of friendship to bring it in line with a Christian worldview (Boularand 1972, Pizzolato 1974 and 1993). Others have objected that Cicero's understanding essentially remained in place without undergoing significant changes (White 1992). Evaluating Ambrose's originality in light of the Ciceronian model, most studies have however failed to address questions pertaining to the purpose of the work and the context of its production.

The aim of this paper is to move into this underexplored territory starting from a close analysis of the theme of friendship in *De officiis*. It will be argued that friendship in this context is best understood as a particular way of constructing community that entails specific modes of inclusion and exclusion. Ambrose's chief interest in friendship lies then in the potential to establish boundaries that safeguard the integrity of the church and the truth of faith against those who ought to be barred from participating in the Christian community because of their deviating beliefs.