

Ante Studium

*Quam frequenter dicebat
antequam dictaret, scriberet, aut praedicaret.*

Creator ineffabilis,

qui de thesauris sapientiae tuae
tres Angelorum hierarchias designasti,
et eas super caelum empyreum
miro ordine collocasti,
atque universi partes
elegantissime disposuisti,

tu inquam qui

verus fons
luminis et sapientiae diceris
atque supereminens principium

infundere digneris

super intellectus mei tenebras
tuae radium claritatis,
duplices in quibus natus sum
a me removens tenebras,
peccatum scilicet et ignorantiam.

Before Study

*St. Thomas frequently recited this
before he dictated, wrote, or preached.*

Ineffable Creator,

Who, from the treasures of Your wisdom,
has established three hierarchies of angels,
has arrayed them in marvelous order
above the fiery heavens,
and has marshaled the regions
of the universe with such artful skill,

You are proclaimed

the true font of light and wisdom,
and the primal origin
raised high beyond all things.

Pour forth a ray of Your brightness

into the darkened places of my mind;
disperse from my soul
the twofold darkness
into which I was born:
sin and ignorance.

You make eloquent the tongues of infants.
Refine my speech
and pour forth upon my lips
the goodness of Your blessing.

Grant to me
keenness of mind,
capacity to remember,
skill in learning,
subtlety to interpret,
and eloquence in speech.

May You
guide the beginning of my work,
direct its progress,
and bring it to completion.

You Who are true God and true Man,
Who live and reign, world without end.

Amen

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Tu, qui linguas infantium facis disertas,
linguam meam erudias
etque in labiis meis gratiam
tuae benedictionis infundas.

Da mihi
intelligendi acumen,
retinendi capacitatem,
addiscendi modum et facilitatem,
interpretandi subtilitatem,
loquendi gratiam copiosam.

Ingressum instruas,
progressum dirigas,
egressum compleas.

Tu qui es verus Deus et homo,
qui vivis et regnas in saecula saeculorum.

Amen

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I was trying to find the origin of evil, but I was quite blind to the evil in my own method of research. In my mind's eye I pictured the whole of creation, both the things which are visible to us, such as the earth and the sea, the air and the stars, the trees and the animals which live their lives and die, and the things which we cannot see, such as the firmament of Heaven above, with all its angels and everything in it that is spiritual - for I thought of spiritual things, too, as material bodies, each in its allotted place. I imagined the whole of your creation as a vast mass made up of different kinds of bodies, some of them real, some of them only the bodies which in my imagination took the place of spirits. I thought of this mass as something huge. I could not, of course, know how big it really was, but I made it as large as need be, though finite in all directions. I pictured you, O Lord, as encompassing this mass on all sides and penetrating it in every part, yet yourself infinite in every dimension. It was as though there were sea everywhere, nothing but an immense, an infinite sea, and somewhere within it a sponge, as large as might be but not infinite, filled through and through with the water of this boundless sea. In some such way as this I imagined that your creation, which was finite, was filled by you, who were infinite. I said to myself, 'Here is God, and here is what he has created. God is good, utterly and entirely better than the things which he has made. But, since he is good, the things that he has made are also good. This is how he contains them all in himself and fills them all with his presence.'

'Where then is evil? What is its origin? How did it steal into the world? What is the root or seed from which it grew? Can it be that there simply is no evil? If so, why do we fear and guard against something which is not there? If our fear is unfounded, it is itself an evil, because it stabs and wrings our hearts for nothing. In fact the evil is all the greater if we are afraid when there is nothing to fear. Therefore, either there is evil and we fear it, or the fear itself is evil.'

'Where then does evil come from, if God made all things and, because he is good, made them good too? It is true that he is the supreme Good, that he is himself a greater Good than these lesser goods which he created. But the Creator and all his creation are both good. Where then does evil come from?

'Can it be that there was something evil in the matter from which he made the universe? When he shaped this matter and fitted it to his purpose, did he leave in it some part which he did not convert to good? But why should he have done this? Are we to believe that, although he is omnipotent, he had not the power to convert the whole of this matter to good and change it so that no evil remained in it? Why, indeed, did he will to make anything of it at all? Why did he not instead, by this same omnipotence, destroy it utterly and entirely? Could it have existed against his will? If it had existed from eternity, why did he allow it to exist in that state through the infinite ages of the past and then, after so long a time, decide to make something of it? If he suddenly determined to act, would it not be more likely that he would use his almighty power to abolish this evil matter, so that nothing should exist besides himself, the total, true, supreme, and infinite Good? Or, if it was not good that a God who was good should not also create and establish something good, could he not have removed and annihilated the evil matter and replaced it with good, of which he could create all things? For he would not be omnipotent if he could not create something good without the help of matter which he had not created himself.'

These were the thoughts which I turned over and over in my unhappy mind, and my anxiety was all the more galling for the fear that death might come before I had found the truth. But my heart clung firmly to the faith in Christ your Son, our Lord and Saviour, which it had received in the Catholic Church. There were many questions on which my beliefs were still indefinite and wavered from the strict rule of doctrine, yet my mind never relinquished the faith but drank it in more deeply day by day.

By this time I had also turned my back upon the astrologers with their illusory claims to predict the future and their insane and impious ritual. In this too, my God, let me acknowledge your mercy from the deepest depths of my soul! For you, and you alone, are the life that recalls us from the death we die each time we err. You alone are the life which never dies and the wisdom that needs no light besides itself,

but illumines all who need to be enlightened, the wisdom that governs the world, down to the leaves that flutter on the trees.

You provided me with a friend who cured my stubborn resistance both to that wise old man Vindicianus¹ and to Nebridius who, for all his youth, was gifted with spiritual qualities that I greatly admired. Vindicianus was quite outspoken on the subject of astrology. Nebridius was not so ready to declare himself, although he too repeated often enough that there was no art by which the future could be foretold. They said that guesswork was often borne out by mere chance. If a man made a great many predictions, several of them would later prove to be true, but he could not know it at the time and would only hit upon them by chance, simply by opening his mouth to speak.

So to cure my obstinacy you found me a friend who was usually ready enough to consult the astrologers. He had made no real study of their lore but, as I have said, he used to make inquiries of them out of curiosity. He did this although he was perfectly well aware of certain facts about them which he said he had heard from his father. If only he had realized it, these facts would have been quite enough to destroy his belief in astrology.

This man, whose name was Firminus, had been educated in the liberal arts and had received a thorough training in rhetoric. He came to consult me, as his closest friend, about some business matters of which he had high hopes, and asked me what prospects I could see in his horoscope, as they call it. I was already beginning to change my mind in favour of Nebridius's opinions on astrology, but I did not refuse outright to read the stars for him and tell him what I saw, though I had little faith in it myself. Nevertheless I added that I was almost convinced that it was all absurd and quite meaningless. He then told me that his father had studied books of astrology with the greatest interest and had had a friend who shared his enthusiasm for the subject. Each was as intent upon this nonsense as the other, and by pooling their experiences they whetted their enthusiasm to the point that, even when their domestic animals had litters, they would note the exact moment of birth and record the position of the stars, intending to use these observations for their experiments in this so-called art.

¹ The doctor previously mentioned in Book IV, chapter 3.

Firminus went on to tell me a story about his own birth. His father had told him that when his mother was pregnant, a female slave in the household of this friend was also expecting a child. Her master was of course aware of her condition, because he used to take very great care to find out even when his dogs were due to have puppies. The two men made the most minute calculations to determine the time of labour of both the women, counting the days, the hours, and even the minutes, and it so happened that both gave birth at exactly the same moment. This meant that the horoscopes which they cast for the two babies had to be exactly the same, down to the smallest particular, though one was the son of the master of the house and the other a slave. For as soon as labour began, each man informed the other of the situation in his house, and each had a messenger waiting, ready to be sent to the other as soon as the birth was announced. As the confinements took place in their own houses, they could easily arrange to be told without delay. The messengers, so Firminus told me, crossed paths at a point which was exactly half way between the two houses, so that each of the two friends inevitably made an identical observation of the stars and could not find the least difference in the time of birth. Yet Firminus, who was born of a rich family, strode along the smoother paths of life. His wealth increased and high honours came his way. But the slave continued to serve his masters. Firminus, who knew him, said that his lot had been in no way bettered.

I believed this story when I heard it, because Firminus was a man whom I could trust. It marked the final end of all my doubts, and my first reaction was to try to redeem Firminus from his interest in astrology. I told him that if I had cast his horoscope and my reading of the stars was correct, I could only have seen in them that his parents were important people, that he belonged to one of the noble families of his town, that he was a freeman by birth, that his upbringing suited his rank, and that his education was liberal. But the slave was born under the very same constellations, and if he had asked me to tell him their meaning, my interpretation of them could not have been true unless I saw in them a family of the meanest sort, the status of a slave, and various other details entirely different from and inconsistent with those which applied to Firminus. This proved that if I were to say what was actually the truth, I should give a different answer to each, though the stars I read were the same; whereas, if I

gave the same answer to each, I should be wrong in fact. It was therefore perfectly clear to me that when predictions based on observations of the stars turn out to be true, it is a matter of luck, not of skill. When they turn out to be wrong, it is not due to lack of skill, but to the perversity of chance.

Taking this as my starting point I began to think the matter over in my mind, so that I should have an answer ready if the eccentrics who made their living at this trade should raise the objection that the story, as Firmianus told it, was untrue, or that he had been misinformed by his father. By now I was eager to move to the attack and reduce these people to silence by ridicule. So I turned my attention to the case of twins, who are generally born within a short time of each other. Whatever significance in the natural order the astrologers may attribute to this interval of time, it is too short to be appreciated by human observation and no allowance can be made for it in the charts which an astrologer has to consult in order to cast a true horoscope. His predictions, then, will not be true, because he would have consulted the same charts for both Esau and Jacob and would have made the same predictions for each of them, whereas it is a fact that the same things did not happen to them both. Therefore, either he would have been wrong in his predictions or, if his forecast was correct, he would not have predicted the same future for each. And yet he would have consulted the same chart in each case. This proves that if he had foretold the truth, it would have been by luck, not by skill. For, O Lord, though neither the astrologers nor those who consult them know it, by your secret prompting each man, when he seeks their advice, hears what it is right for him to hear. For you rule the universe with the utmost justice, and in the inscrutable depths of your just judgement you know what is right for him, because you can see the hidden merits of our souls. And let no man question the why or the wherefore of your judgement. This he must not do, for he is only a man.

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By now, O God my Help, you had released me by this means from the bondage of astrology. But I was still trying to discover the origin of evil, and I could find no solution to the problem. My ideas were always changing, like the ebb and flow of the tide, but you never

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allowed them to sweep me away from the faith by which I believed that you were, that your substance was unchangeable, and that it was yours to care for and to judge mankind. I believed too that it was in Christ your Son, our Lord, and in the Holy Scriptures, which are affirmed by the authority of your Catholic Church, that you had laid the path of man's salvation, so that he might come to that other life which is to follow this our life in death. These beliefs remained intact and firmly rooted in my mind, but I was still burning with anxiety to find the source from which evil comes.

What agony I suffered, my God! How I cried out in grief, while my heart was in labour! But, unknown to me, you were there, listening. Even when I bore the pain of my search valiantly, in silence, the mute sufferings of my soul were loud voices calling to your mercy. You knew what I endured, but no man knew. How little of it could I find words to tell, even to my closest friends! Could they catch a sound of the turmoil in my soul? Time did not suffice to tell them and words failed me. But as I grieved aloud in the weariness of my heart,¹ all my anguish reached your ears. You knew all my longings; the very light that shone in my eyes was mine no longer.² For the light was within, while I looked on the world outside. The light was not in space, but I thought only of things that are contained in space, and in them I found no place where I might rest. They offered me no haven where I could own myself satisfied and content, nor would they let me turn back where I might find contentment and satisfaction. For I was a creature of a higher order than these things, though I was lower than you. You were my true Joy while I was subject to you, and you had made subject to me all the things that you had created inferior to me. This was the right mean, the middle path that led to my salvation, if only I remained true to your likeness and, by serving you, became the master of my own body. But when I rose in pride against you and made onslaught against my Lord, proud of my strong sinews,² even those lower things became my masters and oppressed me, and nowhere could I find respite or time to draw my breath. Everywhere I looked they loomed before my eyes in swarms and clusters, and when I set myself to thinking and tried to escape from them, images of these selfsame things blocked my way, as though they were asking where I meant to go, unclean and undecerving as I was. All this had grown

¹ Ps. 37: 9-11 (38: 8-10). ² Job 15: 26.

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from my wound, for the proud lie wounded at your feet,¹ and I was separated from you by the swelling of my pride, as though my cheeks were so puffed with conceit that they masked the sight of my eyes.

8

O Lord, you are eternal but you will not *always* be indignant with us,² because you take pity on our dust and ashes. You saw me and it pleased you to transform all that was mishapen in me. Your goad was thrusting at my heart, giving me no peace until the eye of my soul could discern you without mistake. Under the secret touch of your healing hand my swelling pride subsided, and day by day the pain I suffered brought me health, like an ointment which stung but cleared the confusion and darkness from the eye of my mind.

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First of all it was your will to make me understand how you thwart the proud and keep your grace for the humble³ and what a great act of your mercy it was to show mankind the way of humility when the Word was made flesh and came to dwell⁴ among the men of this world. So you made use of a man, one who was bloated with the most outrageous pride, to procure me some of the books of the Platonists, translated from the Greek into Latin. In them I read – not, of course, word for word, though the sense was the same and it was supported by all kinds of different arguments – that at the beginning of time the Word already abode, at the beginning of time, with God. It was through him that all things came into being, and without him came nothing that has come to be. In him there was life, and that life was the light of men. And the light shines in darkness, a darkness which was not able to master it. I read too that the soul of man, although it bears witness of the light, is not the Light. But the Word, who is himself God, is the true Light, which enlightens every soul born into the world. He, through whom the world was made, was in the world, and the world treated him as a stranger. But I did not find it written in those books that he came to what was his own, and they who

¹ Ps. 88: 11 (89: 10). ² Ps. 84: 6 (85: 5). ³ 1 Pet. 5: 5.

⁴ John 1: 14.

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were his own gave him no welcome. But all those who did welcome him: he empowered to become the children of God, all those who believe in his name.¹

In the same books I also read of the Word, God, that his birth came not from human stock, not from nature's will or man's, but from God.² But I did not read in them that the Word was made flesh and came to dwell among us.³

Though the words were different and the meaning was expressed in various ways, I also learned from these books that God the Son, being himself, like the Father, of divine nature, did not see, in the rank of Godhead, a prize to be coveted.⁴ But they do not say that he possessed himself, and took the nature of a slave, fashioned in the likeness of men, and presenting himself to us in human form; and then he lowered his own dignity, accepted an obedience which brought him to death, death on a cross; and that is why God has raised him from the dead, given him that name which is greater than any other name; so that everything in heaven and on earth and under the earth must bend the knee before the name of Jesus, and every tongue must confess Jesus Christ as the Lord, dwelling in the glory of God the Father.⁵

The books also tell us that your only-begotten Son abides for ever in eternity with you; that before all time began, he was; that he is above all time and suffers no change; that of his plenty our souls receive their part⁶ and hence derive their blessings; and that by partaking of the Wisdom which abides in them they are renewed, and this is the source of their wisdom. But there is no word in those books to say that in his own appointed time he underwent death for us sinners⁷ and that you did not even spare your own Son, but gave him up for us all.⁸ For you have hidden all this from the wise and revealed it to little children, so that all that labour and are burdened may come to him and he will give them rest, because he is gentle and humble of heart;⁹ and in his own laws he will train the humble, in his own paths the humble he will guide,¹⁰ for he sees how we are restless and forlorn and is merciful to our sins.¹¹ But some hold their heads so high in the clouds of learning that they do not hear him saying Learn from me; I am gentle and humble of heart; and you shall find rest for your souls.¹² Although they have the knowledge of God,

¹ John 1: 1–14. ² Philipp. 2: 6. ³ Philipp. 2: 7–11. ⁴ See John 1: 16.

⁵ Rom. 8: 32. ⁶ Matt. 11: 25, 28, 29. ⁷ Ps. 24: 9 (25: 9).

⁸ Ps. 24: 18 (25: 18). ⁹ Matt. 11: 29.

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they do not honour him or give thanks to him as God; they become fantastic in their notions, and their senseless hearts grow heightened; they, who claim to be so wise, turn fools.¹

I read too in the same books that they had exchanged the glory of the imperishable God² for idols and all kinds of make-believe, for representations of perishable man, of bird and beast and reptile,³ in fact for that Egyptian food for which Esau lost his birthright, since your first-born people worshipping the head of a four-footed beast instead of you and, turning their thoughts towards Egypt,⁴ bowed down their souls, those images made in your likeness, before the semblance of a bullock at grass.⁵ All this I found in those books, but I did not feed upon this fare. For it pleased you, Lord, to rid Jacob of the reproach of infidelity so that the elder should be the servant of the younger,⁶ and you have called the Gentiles into your inheritance. It was from the Gentiles that I had come to you, and I set my mind upon the gold which you willed your people to carry away from Egypt for, wherever it was, it was yours. Through your apostle you told the Athenians that it is in you that we live and move and have our being, as some of their own poets have told us.⁷ And, of course, the books I was reading were written in Athens. But your people had used the gold that was yours to serve the idols of the Egyptians, for they had exchanged God's truth for a lie, reverencing and worshipping the creature in preference to the Creator,⁸ and it was not upon these idols that I set my mind.

These books served to remind me to return to my own self. Under your guidance I entered into the depths of my soul, and this I was able to do because your aid befriended me.⁹ I entered, and with the eye of my soul, such as it was, I saw the Light that never changes casting its rays over the same eye of my soul, over my mind. It was not the common light of day that is seen by the eye of every living thing of flesh and blood, nor was it some more spacious light of the same sort, as if the light of day were to shine far, far brighter than it does and fill all space with a vast brilliance. What I saw was something quite, quite different from any light we know on earth. It shone above my mind,

¹ Rom. 1: 21-3, 25. ² Acts 7: 39. ³ Ps. 105: 20 (106: 20).

⁴ Rom. 9: 12. ⁵ Acts 17: 28. ⁶ Ps. 29: 11 (30: 10).

but not in the way that oil floats above water or the sky hangs over the earth. It was above me because it was itself the Light that made me, and I was below because I was made by it. All who know the truth know this Light, and all who know this Light know eternity. It is the Light that charity knows.

Eternal Truth, true Love, beloved Eternity - all this, my God, you are, and it is to you that I sigh by night and day. When first I knew you, you raised me up so that I could see that there was something to be seen, but also that I was not yet able to see it. I gazed on you with eyes too weak to resist the dazzle of your splendour. Your light shone upon me in its brilliance, and I thrilled with love and dread alike. I realized that I was far away from you. It was as though I were in a land where all is different from your own and I heard your voice calling from on high, saying 'I am the food of full-grown men. Grow and you shall feed on me. But you shall not change me into your own substance, as you do with the food of your body. Instead you shall be changed into me.' I realized too that you have chastened man for his sins¹; you made my life melt away like gossamer,² and I asked myself 'Is truth then nothing at all, simply because it has no extension in space, with or without limits?' And, far off, I heard your voice saying *I am the God who IS*³ I heard your voice, as we hear voices that speak to our hearts, and at once I had no cause to doubt. I might more easily have doubted that I was alive than that Truth had being. For we catch sight of the Truth, as he is known through his creation.⁴

Also I considered all the other things that are of a lower order than yourself, and I saw that they have not absolute being in themselves, nor are they entirely without being. They are real in so far as they have their being from you, but unreal in the sense that they are not what you are. For it is only that which remains in being without change that truly is. As for me, I know no other content but clinging to God,⁵ because unless my being remains in him, it cannot remain in me. But himself ever unchanged, he makes all things new.⁶ I own him as my God; he has no need of taught that is mine.⁷

¹ See Ps. 38: 12 (39: 11). ² Ex. 3: 14. ³ See Rom. 1: 20.

⁴ Ps. 72: 28 (73: 28). ⁵ Wisdom 7: 27. ⁶ Ps. 15: 2 (16: 2).

It was made clear to me also that even those things which are subject to decay are good. If they were of the supreme order of goodness, they could not become corrupt; but neither could they become corrupt unless they were in some way good. For if they were supremely good, it would not be possible for them to be corrupted. On the other hand, if they were entirely without good, there would be nothing in them that could become corrupt. For corruption is harmful, but unless it diminished what is good, it could do no harm. The conclusion then must be either that corruption does no harm - which is not possible; or that everything which is corrupted is deprived of good - which is beyond doubt. But if they are deprived of all good, they will not exist at all. For if they still exist but can no longer be corrupted, they will be better than they were before, because they now continue their existence in an incorruptible state. But could anything be more preposterous than to say that things are made better by being deprived of all good?

So we must conclude that if things are deprived of all good, they cease altogether to be; and this means that as long as they are, they are good. Therefore, whatever is, is good; and evil, the origin of which I was trying to find, is not a substance, because if it were a substance, it would be good. For either it would be an incorruptible substance of the supreme order of goodness, or it would be a corruptible substance which would not be corruptible unless it were good. So it became obvious to me that all that you have made is good, and that there are no substances whatsoever that were not made by you. And because you did not make them all equal, each single thing is good and collectively they are very good, for our God made his whole creation very good.¹

For you evil does not exist, and not only for you but for the whole of your creation as well, because there is nothing outside it which could invade it and break down the order which you have imposed on it. Yet in the separate parts of your creation there are some things which we think of as evil because they are at variance with other things. But

¹ Gen. 1: 31.

there are other things again with which they are in accord, and then they are good. In themselves, too, they are good. And all these things which are at variance with one another are in accord with the lower part of creation which we call the earth. The sky, which is cloudy and windy, suits the earth to which it belongs. So it would be wrong for me to wish that these earthly things did not exist, for even if I saw nothing but them, I might wish for something better, but still I ought to praise you for them alone. For all things give praise to the Lord on earth, monsters of the sea and all its depths; fire and hail, snow and mist, and the storm-wind that executes his decree; all you mountains and hills, all you fruit trees and cedars; all you wild beasts and cattle, creeping things and birds that fly in air; all you kings and peoples of the world, all you that are princes and judges on earth; young men and maids, old men and boys together; let them all give praise to the Lord's name.¹ The heavens, too, ring with your praises, O God, for you are the God of us all. Give praise to the Lord in heaven; praise him, all that dwells on high. Praise him, all you angels of his, praise him, all his armies. Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, every star that shines. Praise him, you highest heavens, you waters beyond the heavens. Let all these praise the Lord.² And since this is so, I no longer wished for a better world, because I was thinking of the whole of creation, and in the light of this clearer discernment I had come to see that though the higher things are better than the lower, the sum of all creation is better than the higher things alone.

Those who find fault with any part of your creation are bereft of reason, just as I was when I decried many of the things which you had made. My soul did not dare to find fault with my God, and therefore it would not admit that what it found distasteful had been created by you. This was why it went astray and accepted the theory of the two substances. This, too, was why it could find no rest and talked so foolishly. Then it had turned away from this error and had imagined for itself a god extended through all space to infinity. Thinking that this god was you, it had enshrined this idol in its heart and, once again, had made of itself a temple abominable to you. But, unknown to me, you soothed my head and closed my eyes so that

¹ Ps. 148: 7-13. ² Ps. 148: 1-5.

they should not look upon *vain phantasies*,¹ and I became drowsy and slept away my madness. I awoke in you and saw that you were infinite, but not in the way I had supposed. This I saw, but it was not with the sight of the flesh that I saw it.

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I looked at other things too and saw that they owe their being to you. I saw that all finite things are in you, not as though you were a place that contained them, but in a different manner. They are in you because you hold all things in your truth as though they were in your hand, and all things are true in so far as they have being. Falseness is nothing but the supposed existence of something which has no being.

I saw too that all things are fit and proper not only to the places but also to the times in which they exist, and that you, who are the only eternal Being, did not begin to work only after countless ages of time had elapsed, because no age of time, past or still to come, could either come or go if it were not that you abide for ever and cause time to come and go.

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From my own experience I knew that there was nothing strange in the fact that a man who finds bread agreeable to the taste when he is well finds it hard to eat when he is sick, and that light is hateful to sore eyes, although we welcome it when our sight is hale and clear. In the same way the wicked find your justice disagreeable, just as they find vipers and worms unpleasant. Yet these animals were created good by you. They were created to suit the lower order of your creation. Thus the wicked themselves are suited to this lower order in as much as they are unlike you, whereas they are suited to the higher order in so far as they become more like you. And when I asked myself what wickedness was, I saw that it was not a substance but perversion of the will when it turns aside from you, O God, who are the supreme substance, and veers towards things of the lowest order, being *bewelled alive*² and becoming inflated with desire for things outside itself.

¹ Ps. 118: 37 (119: 37). ² Eccles. 10: 10.

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I was astonished that although I now loved you and not some phantom in your place, I did not persist in enjoyment of my God. Your beauty drew me to you, but soon I was dragged away from you by my own weight and in dismay I plunged again into the things of this world. The weight I carried was the habit of the flesh. But your memory remained with me and I had no doubt at all that you were the one to whom I should cling, only I was not yet able to cling to you. For *ever the soul is weighed down by a mortal body, earth-bound cell that clogs the manifold activity of its thought*.¹ I was most certain, too, that *from the foundations of the world men have caught sight of your invisible nature, your eternal power, and your divineness, as they are known through your creatures*.² For I wondered how it was that I could appreciate beauty in material things on earth or in the heavens, and what it was that enabled me to make correct decisions about things that are subject to change and to rule that one thing ought to be like this, another like that. I wondered how it was that I was able to judge them in this way, and I realized that above my own mind, which was liable to change, there was the never changing, true eternity of truth. So, step by step, my thoughts moved on from the consideration of material things to the soul, which perceives things through the senses of the body, and then to the soul's inner-power, to which the bodily senses communicate external facts. Beyond this dumb animals cannot go. The next stage is the power of reason, to which the facts communicated by the bodily senses are submitted for judgement.

This power of reason, realizing that in me it too was liable to change, led me on to consider the source of its own understanding. It withdrew my thoughts from their normal course and drew back from the confusion of images which pressed upon it, so that it might discover what light it was that had been shed upon it when it proclaimed for certain that what was immutable was better than that which was not, and how it had come to know the immutable itself. For unless, by some means, it had known the immutable, it could not possibly have been certain that it was preferable to the mutable. And so, in an instant of awe, my mind attained to the sight of the God who IS. Then, at last, *I caught sight of your invisible nature, as it is*

¹ Wisdom 9: 15. ² Rom. 1: 20.

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*known through your creatures.*¹ But I had no strength to fix my gaze upon them. In my weakness I recoiled and fell back into my old ways, carrying with me nothing but the memory of something that I loved and longed for, as though I had sensed the fragrance of the fare but was not yet able to eat it.

18

I began to search for a means of gaining the strength I needed to enjoy you, but I could not find this means until I embraced the mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ, who is a man, like them,² and also rises as God over all things, blessed for ever.³ He was calling to me and saying *I am the way; I am truth and life.*⁴ He it was who united with our flesh that food which I was too weak to take; for *the Word was made flesh*⁵ so that your Wisdom, by which you created all things, might be milk to suckle us in infancy. For I was not humble enough to conceive of the humble Jesus Christ as my God, nor had I learnt what lesson his human weakness was meant to teach. The lesson is that your Word, the eternal Truth, which far surpasses even the higher parts of your creation, raises up to himself all who subject themselves to him. From the clay of which we are made he built for himself a lowly house in this world below, so that by this means he might cause those who were to be made subject to him to abandon themselves and come over to his side. He would cure them of the pride that swelled up in their hearts and would nurture love in its place, so that they should no longer stride ahead confident in themselves, but might realize their own weakness when at their feet they saw God himself, enfeebled by sharing this garment of our mortality. And at last, from weariness, they would cast themselves down upon his humanity, and when it rose they too would rise.

19

But my mind was filled with thoughts of another kind. I thought of Christ, my Lord, as no more than a man of extraordinary wisdom, whom none could equal. In particular, I saw his miraculous birth of a virgin mother, by which he showed us that worldly goods are to

¹ Rom. 1: 20. ² 1 Tim. 2: 5. ³ Rom. 9: 5. ⁴ John 14: 6.
⁵ John 1: 14.

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be despised for the sake of immortal life, as an act of the divine providence which looks after us, so that by it he merited his special authority as our Teacher. But I had not even an inkling of the meaning of the mystery of the Word made flesh. From what the Scriptures record of him, that is, that he ate and drank, that he slept and walked, that he was sometimes happy, sometimes sad, and that he preached his gospel, all I had learnt was that when your Word took human flesh, he must also have taken a human soul and a human mind. This much is known to all who know that your Word cannot suffer change, as by now I knew in so far as I was able to know it. In fact I had no doubt of it at all. For to move the limbs of the body at one moment, and at the next to hold them still; to feel some emotion and then not to feel it; at one instant to utter words which convey an intelligible meaning, and at another to remain silent – all these characteristics show that there is the possibility of change in the mind and in the soul. If they were falsely attributed to Christ in the records of his life, the whole of Scripture would be open to the charge of falsehood and mankind could no longer place any sure faith in it. So, granted that what the Scriptures say is true, I accepted that Christ was perfect man. I did not think of him as having only the body of a man or man's body and sensitive soul without his reasoning mind, but as a man complete. And I thought he was superior to other men, not because he was Truth in person, but because in him human nature had reached the highest point of excellence and he had a more perfect share of divine wisdom.

Alypius, on the other hand, thought that Catholics believed that God was clothed in the flesh in the sense that in Christ there was the Godhead and the flesh but no soul. He did not think that their teaching was that Christ had a human mind, and his approach to the Christian faith itself was delayed because he found it a convincing argument that the actions recorded of Christ could only have been performed by a creature endowed with vitality and the power of reason. Later on he realized that this was the error of the Apollinarian heretics and he then gladly accepted the Catholic faith. As for me, I must confess that it was not until later that I learned how true Catholic doctrine differs from the error of Photinus in interpreting the meaning of the incarnation. It is indeed true that the refutation of heretics gives greater prominence to the tenets of your Church

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and the principles of sound doctrine. For parties there must needs be, so that those who are true metal may be distinguished from the rest.¹

20

By reading these books of the Platonists I had been prompted to look for truth as something incorporeal, and I caught sight of your invisible nature, as it is known through your creatures.² Though I was thwarted of my wish to know more, I was conscious of what it was that my mind was too clouded to see. I was certain both that you are and that you are infinite, though without extent in terms of space either limited or unlimited. I was sure that it is you who truly are, since you are always the same, varying in neither part nor motion. I knew too that all other things derive their being from you, and the one indisputable proof of this is the fact that they exist at all. I was quite certain of these truths, but I was too weak to enjoy you. I used to talk glibly as though I knew the meaning of it all, but unless I had looked for the way which leads to you in Christ our Saviour, instead of finding knowledge I should have found my end. For I had now begun to wish to be thought wise. I was full of self-esteem, which was a punishment of my own making. I ought to have deplored my state, but instead my knowledge only bred self-conceit.³ For was I not without charity, which builds its edifice on the firm foundation of humility, that is, on Jesus Christ?⁴ But how could I expect that the Platonist books would ever teach me charity? I believe that it was by your will that I came across those books before I studied the Scriptures, because you wished me always to remember the impressions they had made on me, so that later on, when I had been chastened by your Holy Writ and my wounds had been touched by your healing hand, I should be able to see and understand the difference between presumption and confession, between those who see the goal that they must reach, but cannot see the road by which they are to reach it, and those who see the road to that blessed country which is meant to be no mere vision but our home. For if I had not come across these books until after I had been formed in the mould of your Holy Scriptures and had learnt to love you through familiarity with them, the Platonist teaching might have swept me from my foothold on

¹ 1 Cor. 11: 19. ² Rom. 1: 20. ³ 1 Cor. 8: 1. ⁴ See 1 Cor. 3: 11; 8: 1.

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the solid ground of piety, and even if I had held firm to the spirit in which the Scriptures had imbued me for my salvation, I might have thought it possible for a man who read nothing but the Platonist books to derive the same spirit from them alone.

21

So I seized eagerly upon the venerable writings inspired by your Holy Spirit, especially those of the apostle Paul. At one time it had seemed to me that he sometimes contradicted himself and that the purport of his words did not agree with the evidence of the law and the prophets, but these difficulties now disappeared once and for all. I saw clearly that his sober discourse pointed to one meaning only, and I learned to rejoice with awe in my heart.¹ I began to read and discovered that whatever truth I had found in the Platonists was set down here as well, and with it there was praise for your grace bestowed. For Saint Paul teaches that he who sees ought not to boast as though what he sees, and even the power by which he sees, had not come to him by gift.² For, whatever powers he has, did they not come to him by gift?² By the gift of grace he is not only shown how to see you, who are always the same, but is also given the strength to hold you. By your grace, too, if he is far from you and cannot see you, he is enabled to walk upon the path that leads him closer to you, so that he may see you and hold you. For even if a man invariably applauds God's disposition,³ how is he to resist that other disposition in his lower self, which raises war against the disposition of his conscience, so that he is handed over as a captive to that disposition towards sin, which his lower self contains?⁴ For you have right on your side, O Lord, but we are sinners, that have wronged and forsaken you; all is amiss with us.⁵ We are bowed down by your chastisement.⁶ In justice we have been delivered to the author of sin, the prince of death, because he has coaxed us to make our wills conform with his, for he has never taken his stand upon your truth.⁷ What is man to do in his plight? Who is to set him free from a nature thus doomed to death? Nothing else than the grace of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord,⁸ who was begotten by you to be co-eternal with yourself and whom you made when first you went about your work.⁹ In

¹ Ps. 2: 11. ² 1 Cor. 4: 7. ³ Rom. 7: 22. ⁴ Rom. 7: 23. ⁵ Dan. 3: 27-32.

⁶ Ps. 31: 4 (32: 4). ⁷ John 8: 44. ⁸ Rom. 7: 24. ⁹ Prov. 8: 22.

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him the prince of this world found no crime worthy of death:¹ yet he slew him, and thus the *decree made to our prejudice was cancelled*.²

None of this is contained in the Platonists' books. Their pages have not the mien of the true love of God. They make no mention of the tears of confession or of the sacrifice that you will never disdain, a broken spirit, a heart that is humbled and contrite,³ nor do they speak of the salvation of your people, the city adorned like a bride,⁴ the foretaste of your Spirit,⁵ or the chalice of our redemption. In them no one sings *No rest has my soul but in God's hands; to him I look for deliverance. I have no other stronghold, no other deliverer but him; safe in his protection, I fear no deadly fall*.⁶ In them no one listens to the voice which says *Come to me all you that labour*.⁷ They disdain his teaching, because he is gentle and humble of heart. For you have hidden all this from the wise and revealed it to little children.⁸

It is one thing to despoil the land of peace from a wooded hilltop and, unable to find the way to it, struggle on through trackless wastes where traitors and runaways, captained by their prince, who is lion and serpent⁹ in one, lie in wait to attack. It is another thing to follow the high road to that land of peace, the way that is defended by the care of the heavenly Commander. Here there are no deserters from heaven's army to prey upon the traveller, because they shun this road as a torment.

It was wonderful how these truths came home to me when I read *the least of your apostles*⁹ and the thought of your works had set my heart trembling.

¹ See John 14: 30. ² Col. 2: 14. ³ Ps. 50: 19 (51: 17).

⁴ Apoc. (Rev.) 21: 2. ⁵ 11 Cor. 1: 22. ⁶ Ps. 61: 2, 3 (62: 1, 2).

⁷ Matt. 11: 25, 28, 29. ⁸ Ps. 90: 13 (91: 13). ⁹ 1 Cor. 15: 9.

BOOK VIII

I

My God, let me be thankful as I remember and acknowledge all your mercies. Let my whole self be steeped in love of you and all my being cry *Lord, there is none like you!*¹ You have broken the chains that bound me; I will sacrifice in your honour.² I shall tell how it was that you broke them and, when they hear what I have to tell, all who adore you will exclaim, 'Blessed be the Lord in heaven and on earth. Great and wonderful is his name.'

The words of your Scriptures were planted firmly in my heart and on all sides you were there like a rampart to defend me. Of your eternal life I was certain, although I had only seen it like a confused reflection in a mirror,³ and I had now been rid of all my doubts about an incorruptible substance from which all other substance takes its being. I did not ask for more certain proof of you, but only to be made more steadfast in you. But in my worldly life all was confusion. My heart had still to be rid of the leaven which remained over.⁴ I should have been glad to follow the right road, to follow our Saviour himself, but still I could not make up my mind to venture along the narrow path.

By your inspiration it seemed to me a good plan to go and see Simplicianus who, as I could see for myself, was a good servant of yours. The light of your grace plainly shone in him and, besides, I had been told that from boyhood he had always led a most devout life. By now he was an old man and I thought that in all the long years he had spent to such good purpose in following your way he must have gained great experience and much knowledge, as indeed he had. I hoped that if I put my problems to him, he would draw upon his experience and his knowledge to show me how best a man in my state of mind might walk upon your way.

¹ Ps. 34: 10 (35: 10). ² Ps. 115: 7 (116: 7). ³ 1 Cor. 13: 12.

⁴ 1 Cor. 5: 7.