

*147. Augustine to the noble lady, Paulina,<sup>1</sup> greeting (413)*

THE BOOK ON THE VISION OF GOD

*Chapter 1*

Conscious of the debt which I have incurred through your request and my promise, devout servant of God, Paulina, I ought not to have been so slow in discharging it. For, when you asked me to write you something lengthy and detailed about the invisible God, and whether He can be seen by bodily eyes, I could not refuse lest I affront your holy zeal, but I put off the fulfillment of my promise, either because of other tasks or because I needed somewhat more time to think over what you asked me. But, since it is such a deep subject that it becomes more difficult the more one thinks of it—not so much in what is to be thought and said of it, but in the method of persuasion to be used with those who hold contrary opinions—I decided it was high time to put an end to my delay, in the hope that writing rather than postponing it would bring me divine help. Therefore, I think in the first place that the manner of life has more effect in this kind of research than the manner of speech. Those who have learned from our Lord, Jesus Christ, to be meek and humble of heart<sup>2</sup> make more progress by meditation and prayer than by reading and listening. I do not mean that speech will cease to play its part, but when he who plants and he who waters have done the duty of their task, he leaves the rest to Him who gives the increase,<sup>3</sup> since He made the one who plants and the one who waters.

1 Of this lady, who is called 'religious servant of God,' which seems to make her a nun, and '*clarissima*,' which points to her being an aristocrat, nothing much is known. Fr. Pope (*Saint Augustine of Hippo*) refers to her as St. Paulina, but does not give his source.

2 Matt. 11.29.

3 1 Cor. 3.7.

*Chapter 2*

According to the inward man, then, receive the words of understanding, for that is renewed day by day, even when 'the outward man is corrupted,'<sup>1</sup> either by the chastisement of abstinence, or by a spell of ill health, or by some mishap, or at least by the very onset of age—a necessary consequence even for those who enjoy good health for a long time. Therefore, lift up the spirit of your mind, 'which is renewed unto knowledge, according to the image of him that created him,'<sup>2</sup> where Christ dwells in you by faith,<sup>3</sup> where there is no Jew or Greek, bond, free, male or female,<sup>4</sup> where you will not die when you begin to be freed of your body, because there you did not waste away although weighed down by years. Intent on this interior life of yours, take note and see what I say. I do not want you to depend on my authority, so as to think that you must believe something because it is said by me; you should rest your belief either on the canonical Scriptures, if you do not yet see how true something is, or on the truth made manifest to you interiorly, so that you may see clearly.

*Chapter 3*

By way of example I shall say something to prepare you beforehand for greater certitude, and I will draw it preferably from that source from which the task of constructing the argument in this subject has been derived. We believe that God is seen in the present life, but do we believe that we see Him with our bodily eyes, as we see the sun, or with the gaze of the mind, as everyone sees himself inwardly, when he sees

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1 2 Cor. 4.16.

2 Col. 3.10.

3 Eph. 3.17.

4 Gal. 3.28; 1 Cor. 12.13; Col. 3.11.

himself living, wishing, seeking, knowing or not knowing? You yourself, when you have read this letter, recall that you have seen the sun with your bodily eyes; you can also see it at once, if it is the right time, if you are in a place where the sky is in your range of vision, from the direction needed to look upon the sun. But to look upon those things which I said are beheld by the mind, namely, that you are living, that you wish to see God, that you seek this, that you know that you are living and wishing and seeking, but you do not know in what manner God is seen; to see all these things, I repeat, you do not use your bodily eyes, nor do you perceive or look for any part of space through which your gaze may travel in order to attain to the sight of these things. This is how you see your life, will, power of search, knowledge, ignorance—for it is no despicable part of this kind of sight to see that you do not know—this, I repeat, is how you see all these things: you see them in yourself, you possess them within yourself, and, the more simply and inwardly you behold them, the more clearly and surely you see them, without any outline of figures or brightness of colors. Since, therefore, we do not see God in this life either with bodily eyes, as we see heavenly or earthly bodies, or with the gaze of the mind, as we see some of those things which I have mentioned, and which you most certainly behold within yourself, why do we believe that He is seen, except that we rest our faith upon the Scripture, where we read: ‘Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God,’<sup>1</sup> and upon any other writings to this effect with the same divine authority? Of this we believe that it is forbidden to doubt, and we do not doubt that it is an act of piety to believe.

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. 5.8.

*Chapter 4*

Keep this distinction in mind, then, so that, if I suggest to you in the course of my argument that you see something with the eyes of the flesh, or perceive it with any other of its senses, or recall that you have so perceived it, as colors, noises, odors, tastes, warmth are perceived—or if we experience anything else in the body by seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting or touching—or that you see it with the gaze of the mind, as you see your life, will, thought, memory, understanding, knowledge, faith or anything else which you perceive mentally, and you do not doubt that it is so, not only by believing, but by manifestly beholding it; you may conclude that I have demonstrated my point. But what I shall not so demonstrate, so that it be held as seen and perceived either by bodily or mental senses, and if I shall nevertheless say something which must of necessity be either true or false, but which seems to belong to neither of these categories, it remains only that it be believed or not believed. But, if it is supported by the evident authority of the divine Scriptures, namely, of those which in the Church are called canonical, it must be believed without any reservation. In regard to other witnesses or evidence which are offered as guarantees of belief, you may believe or not, according as you estimate that they either have or have not the weight necessary to produce belief.

*Chapter 5*

If we believed none at all of those things which we have not seen, that is, have not experienced as being actually present either mentally or corporally, or have not learned



from holy Scripture, either by reading or hearing of them, how could we know of the origin of cities where we never have been, such as that Rome was founded by Romulus, or, to take more recent events, that Constantinople was founded by Constantine? Finally, how could we know what parents begot us, or from what fathers, grandfathers, ancestors we have sprung? Since we obviously know many things of this sort, which nevertheless we have not learned either as present to any of our faculties, as the sun and the mental faculty of the will, or on the authority of the canonical writings, as that Adam was the first man, or that Christ was born in the flesh, suffered and rose again, we know these things on the word of others, and we have concluded that their testimony, at least in this field of information, is completely trustworthy. If we are sometimes led astray in such matters, either by believing that something is so when it is not so, or that it is not so when it is, we conclude that there is no danger so long as the matter is not contrary to that faith on which our devotion is founded. This preface of mine raises a question not yet formulated, but it forewarns you and others who will read these words of the sort of judgment you should make, either of my writings or of anyone else's, lest you think that you know what you do not know, or rashly believe what you have neither perceived by the senses of your body or the gaze of your mind upon the evidence of the subject to be known, nor learned on the authority of the canonical Scriptures, as something worthy of belief even though not present to the bodily or mental faculties.

### *Chapter 6*

Shall we now come to the subject? or is there further need of instruction before you read? There are some who think that

the very act which we call belief is the only act of the mind when it looks upon something. If that is the case, there is something wrong with that preface of ours, in which I made the distinction that it is one thing to perceive an object through the body, as the sun in the sky, or a mountain, a tree, or some physical object on the earth; another, to perceive by the gaze of the mind a fact no less evident, as we are inwardly conscious of our own will when we will something, or our thought when we think, or our memory when we remember, or any other such experience in the mind without the intervention of the body; and, finally, that it is something else again to believe what is not present to the bodily or mental faculties, nor recalled as having been so present, as that Adam was created without parents, and that Christ was born of a virgin, suffered, and rose again. These events were accomplished in the flesh and certainly could have been seen in the flesh, if we had been there, but now they are not present to us, as that light is present which is seen by our eyes, or as we are now mentally conscious of the will by which we now will something. Since this distinction is not false, doubtless my forewarning did not contain a distinction phrased with too little regard for clearness, as between believing and being mentally conscious of something.

### *Chapter 7*

What shall we say, then? Is it enough to say that there is this difference between seeing and believing, that we see what is present and believe what is absent? Perhaps it really is enough, if by the word present in this connection we understand what is an object of our bodily or mental faculties. Thus, I see this light by a bodily sense, thus, I am fully aware of my will, because these are presented to my mental faculties,

and are present within me. However, if anyone whose face and voice are present to me should show me his will, that will which he shows me would not be an object of my bodily or mental faculties; hence, I do not see, I believe, or, if I think he is lying, I do not believe, even if it should happen to be as he says. Therefore, the things which are not present to our faculties are believed if the authority on which they are offered seems trustworthy; things which are before us are seen, hence they are said to be present to our mental or bodily faculties. Although there are five senses in the body—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—of these, sight is attributed especially to the eyes, but we use this word also of the others. Not only do we say ‘See, how bright it is,’ but also ‘See, what a noise,’ ‘See, what a smell,’ ‘See, what a taste,’ ‘See, how hot it is.’ The fact that I said things not present to the senses are believed is not to be understood as meaning that we classify among them what we saw at some previous time, and now remember and have a certainty of having seen; for those are classified not among the objects of our belief, but as things we have seen and therefore known, not because we rest our belief on other evidence, but because we remember and know without any doubt that we have seen them.

### *Chapter 8*

Our knowledge, therefore, consists of things seen and things believed. Of the things which we have seen or now see, we are our own witnesses, but in those which we believe, we are led to our assent by the testimony of others, because, of the things which we do not recall having seen, or do not now see, we receive indications, either by spoken or written words, or by certain documents, and, when these have been seen, the unseen things are believed. Not without reason do we say that

we know not only what we have seen or see, but also what we believe, when we yield assent to some fact under the influence of suitable evidence or witnesses. Moreover, if it is not inappropriate to say that we also know what we firmly believe, this arises from the fact that we are correctly said to see mentally what we believe, even though it is not present to our senses. It is true that knowledge is attributed to the mind, whether the object of its perception and recognition has come to it through the bodily senses or through the mind itself, and faith itself is certainly seen by the mind, although what is believed by faith is not seen. For this reason the Apostle Peter says: 'In whom also now, though you see him not, you believe,'<sup>1</sup> and the Lord Himself said: 'Blessed are they that have not seen and have believed.'<sup>2</sup>

### *Chapter 9*

When, then, a man is told: 'Believe that Christ rose from the dead,' if he believes, notice what he sees, notice what he believes, and distinguish between them. He sees the man whose voice he hears, and that same voice is included among the objects of the bodily senses, according to what we said above. The witness and the testimony are two different things, of which one is referred to the eyes, the other to the ears. But perhaps the importance of this witness is augmented by the authority of other testimonies, namely, of the divine Scriptures, or of any others by whom he is induced to believe. The Scriptures are then included among the objects of the bodily senses: of the eyes if he reads them, or of the ears if he hears them read. He sees them in his mind and he understands whatever is signified by the shapes or sounds of the letters; he sees his

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 1.8.

<sup>2</sup> John 20.29.

own faith by which he answers instantly that he believes; he sees the thought by which he thinks what benefit can accrue to him by believing; he sees the will by which he draws near to embrace religion; he even sees a certain image of the resurrection itself, as produced in his mind, and without this it is impossible to understand anything which is described as having happened corporeally, whether it is believed or not. But, I think you do distinguish between the way in which he sees his own faith by which he believes and the way he sees that image of the resurrection produced in his mind: something which even the unbeliever sees if he hears these words.

### *Chapter 10*

Therefore, he sees all these things partly through the body and partly through the mind. But he does not see the will of the one from whom he hears the order to believe, nor the actual Resurrection of Christ, but he does believe; yet he is said to see it by a sort of mental gaze, according to his faith in the testimonies rather than in things believed to be present. For, the things which he sees are present to the senses either of mind or body, although the will of the one from whom he hears the order to believe has not become something past, but remains in the speaker. The same one who speaks sees this will in himself; the one who hears does not see it, he believes it. But the Resurrection of Christ is past, and the men who lived at that time did not see it; those who saw the living Christ had seen Him dying, but they did not see the actual Resurrection; they believed it most firmly by seeing and touching the living Christ whom they had known as dead. We believe wholly that He rose again, that He was then seen and touched by men, that He now lives in heaven, and that 'he dieth now no more, death shall no more have dominion over

him.<sup>1</sup> But the actual fact is not present to our bodily senses, as this sky and earth are present, nor to the gaze of our mind, as the very faith by which we believe is present.

### *Chapter 11*

But I think you have understood, through this preface of mine, what it is to see either mentally or corporeally, and what difference there is between that and believing. This indeed happens in the mind and is seen by the mind, since our faith is visible to our mind. However, what is believed by that faith is not visible to our bodily senses, just as the same body in which Christ rose is not visible; and it is not visible to another's mind, as your faith is not perceived by my mind, although I believe it is in you, but I do not see it corporeally—and neither can you—nor mentally, as you can; as I see mine, but you cannot. 'For no man knoweth what is done in man but the spirit of a man that is in him,'<sup>1</sup> 'until the Lord come who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the thoughts of hearts,'<sup>2</sup> so that each one will see not only his own but those of others. In this sense the Apostle said that 'no man knoweth what is done in man, but the spirit of man that is in him', according to what we see in ourselves; for according to what we believe but do not see, we know that there are many faithful, and we are known to many.

### *Chapter 12*

If these distinctions are now clear, let us come to the main

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<sup>1</sup> Rom. 6.9.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 2.11.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 4.5.

point. We know that God can be seen, because it is written: 'Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God.'<sup>1</sup> Perhaps I should not have said 'We know,' but 'We believe,' since we have not at any time seen God either corporeally, as we see this light, or mentally, as we see the very faith in us by which we believe; but I do so only because it is written in that part of Scripture. As we are believers in it, have we the least doubt of its being true? Still, when the Apostle John said something similar, his words were: 'We know that when he shall appear, we shall be like to him, because we shall see him as he is.'<sup>2</sup> See! he said he knew something that had not happened, and which he knew by believing, but not by seeing. Therefore we were right in saying: 'We know that God can be seen,' although we have not seen Him, but we have put our faith in the divine authority which is contained in the holy books.

### *Chapter 13*

But, what is the meaning of that saying of the same authority: 'No man hath seen God at any time'?<sup>1</sup> Would the answer be that those words refer to seeing God, not to having seen Him? For it says 'They shall see God,' not 'they have seen; and 'we shall see him as he is,' not 'we have seen.' Therefore, the words, 'no man hath seen God at any time,' do not contradict those former statements. The clean of heart, who wish to see God, shall see Him whom they have not seen. But what about this: 'I have seen God face to face, and my soul hath been saved'?<sup>2</sup> Is it not contrary to that other passage: 'No man hath seen God at any time,' and this,

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. 5.8.

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3.2.

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<sup>1</sup> John 1.18; 1 John 4.12.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 32.30.

written of Moses, that he spoke to God, 'face to face, as a man is wont to speak to his friend,'<sup>3</sup> and this: 'I saw the Lord of hosts sitting upon a throne,'<sup>4</sup> and other such testimonies which are usually drawn from the same authority—how can it be that they are not contrary to the words, 'No man hath seen God at any time'? Yet, the very Gospel can be considered self-contradictory. For, how can it be true to say, as it says: 'he that seeth me, seeth the Father also,'<sup>5</sup> if no man hath seen God at any time? Or how is it true that 'Their angels always see the face of my Father,' if no one hath seen God at any time?

### *Chapter 14*

By what rule of interpretation shall we prove that these seemingly contrary and contradictory statements are neither contrary nor contradictory? For it cannot be remotely possible that the authority of the Scriptures should be fallacious at any point. If we say of the passage, 'no one hath seen God at any time,' we understand it of men alone; as it says in that other place: 'no one knoweth what is done in man, but the spirit of a man that is in him,'<sup>1</sup>—no one obviously of men, for this cannot be applied to God, since it is written of Christ that 'he needed not that any should give testimony of man, for he knew what was in man.'<sup>2</sup> The Apostle, explaining this more fully, says: 'Whom no one of men hath seen, nor can see'; therefore, if he says 'no one hath seen God at any time,' it is as if he said 'no one of men,' and thus this difficulty will seem to be solved, at least to this extent, that it is not contrary to what

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<sup>3</sup> Exod. 33.11.

<sup>4</sup> Isa. 6.1.

<sup>5</sup> John 14.9.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 2.11.

<sup>2</sup> John 2.25.



the Lord says: 'Their angels always see the face of my Father,' since we surely believe that the angels see God, 'whom no one hath seen at any time,' but no one of men. How, then, was God seen by Abraham,<sup>3</sup> Isaac,<sup>4</sup> Jacob,<sup>5</sup> Job,<sup>6</sup> Moses,<sup>7</sup> Micheas,<sup>8</sup> Isaias,<sup>9</sup> of whom the absolutely truthful Scripture bears witness that they saw God, if no one of men 'hath ever seen God, nor can see him'?

### *Chapter 15*

Some even want to prove that the wicked will see God, and they think that God has been seen by the Devil also, taking in that sense what is written in the Book of Job, that the Devil came with the angels into the presence of God,<sup>1</sup> so that they even call in question how this is said: 'Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God,'<sup>2</sup> and this: 'follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see God.'<sup>3</sup> I greatly wonder whether those who think that the wicked will see God, and that God has been seen by the Devil, go so far as to claim that they are also clean of heart and that they follow peace and holiness with all men.

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<sup>3</sup> Gen. 18.1.

<sup>4</sup> Gen. 26.2.

<sup>5</sup> Gen. 32.30.

<sup>6</sup> Job 38.1; 42.9.

<sup>7</sup> Exod. 33.11.

<sup>8</sup> 3 Kings 22.19.

<sup>9</sup> Isa. 6.1.

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<sup>1</sup> Job 1.6; 2.1.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 5.8.

<sup>3</sup> Heb. 12.14.

*Chapter 16*

The statement which the Lord makes, 'He that seeth me, seeth the Father also,'<sup>1</sup> can, on somewhat more careful examination, be shown not to be contrary to the words, 'no man hath seen God at any time.' He did not say: 'Because you have seen me, you have seen the Father also,' but by saying: 'he that seeth me, seeth the Father also,' he wished to show the unity of substance between the Father and the Son, that they might not be thought to differ from each other in any way. Thus, since it is true to say: 'He that seeth me, seeth the Father also,' and since it is clear that no one of men hath seen God at any time, no one can be imagined to have seen either the Father or the Son, in so far as the Son is God, and is one God with the Father; but, in so far as He is man, certainly 'afterwards he was seen upon earth, and conversed with men.'<sup>2</sup>

*Chapter 17*

But what is a serious difficulty is how there is no contradiction in the statements about so many men of old seeing God, if 'no one hath seen God at any time,' whom 'no man hath seen, nor can see.' You see what a hard question you have suggested to me, on which you want me to write at length and exhaustively, in the limits of a short letter, and which it seemed to you should be explained carefully and fully. Are you willing to give your attention meantime to the answers I have found in the works of other excellent commentators on the divine Scriptures, regarding what they think about seeing God, which may perhaps satisfy your desire, although it may be that you are acquainted with them? Give your

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<sup>1</sup> John 14.19.

<sup>2</sup> Bar. 3.38; John 1.14.

attention, then, to these few points, if you will. When blessed Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, in his commentary on the Gospel, had come to the place<sup>1</sup> where the angel appeared in the temple to the priest Zachary,<sup>2</sup> here are the great and noble things he said on this occasion about the vision of God.

### *Chapter 18*

‘Not without reason,’ he says, ‘is the angel seen in the temple, because the coming of the true priest was then being proclaimed, and the heavenly sacrifice was being prepared, in which angels were to minister. And well is he said to have appeared to one who beheld him suddenly. The divine Scripture is accustomed to use this particular term, either of the angels or of God, so that what cannot be seen in advance is said to appear. Thus you have, “God appeared to Abraham at the oak of Mambre,”<sup>1</sup> for he who is not perceived beforehand, but is suddenly presented to sight, is said to appear. But the objects of the senses are not seen in that way, and He on whose will it depends to be seen, and whose nature it is not to be seen, is seen because of His will. For, if He does not wish it, He is not seen, but if He wishes, He is seen. Thus, God appeared to Abraham because He willed it; to others He did not appear, because He did not will it. When Stephen was being stoned by the people, he saw the heavens opened and Jesus standing at the right hand of God,<sup>2</sup> but this was not seen by the people. Isaias saw the Lord of hosts,<sup>3</sup> but no one else could see Him, because He appeared to whom He

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1 *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* 1,24-27 (CSEL 32; 4.25) .

2 Luke 1.11.

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1 Gen. 18.1. The Douay version reads: ‘in the vale.’

2 Acts 7.55.

3 Isa. 6.1.

pleased. And why do we speak of men when of the heavenly powers and virtues themselves we read that "no one hath seen God at any time"? To this the Apostle added: "the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, if no one has seen God the Father at any time, we must either necessarily assent to the Son having been seen in the Old Testament, and the heretics must cease to give a beginning to Him who was seen before He was born of the Virgin, or certainly it is not possible to refute the argument that the Father or the Son, or at least the Holy Spirit—if, however, the Holy Spirit can be seen—are seen under the appearance which their will has chosen, but their nature has not originated, since we learn that the Spirit also was seen under the form of a dove.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, "no one hath seen God at any time," because no one has beheld that fullness of the divinity which dwells in God;<sup>6</sup> no one has experienced it with mind or eyes, for the word "seen" is to be referred to both. Finally, when he adds, "the only-begotten Son himself, he hath declared him," it is the sight of minds rather than of eyes which is described. For beauty is seen, but virtue is declared; the former is grasped by the eyes, the latter by the mind. But, why should I speak of the Trinity? A seraphim appeared, when he willed it, and Isaias alone heard his voice;<sup>7</sup> an angel appeared and is now present, but is not seen. It is not in our power to see, but in His to appear. However, even if we have no power of seeing, there is a grace of meriting that we may be able to see. Therefore, he who had the grace merited the occasion. We do not merit the occasion, because we have not the grace of seeing God. Is it any wonder that the Lord is not seen in the present world except when He wills? Even in the resurrection

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<sup>4</sup> John 1.18.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 3.16.

<sup>6</sup> Col. 2.9.

<sup>7</sup> Isa. 6.6,7.

itself it is not easy to see God, except for the clean of heart; hence: "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God."<sup>8</sup> How many kinds of blessed He had enumerated, yet to none of them had He promised the ability to see God! If, then, those who are clean of heart will see God, doubtless others will not see Him; the unworthy will not see Him, nor will he who does not wish to see God be able to see Him. God is not seen in any locality, but in the clean heart; He is not sought by bodily eyes, nor limited by our sight, nor held by touch, nor heard by His utterance, nor perceived in His approach. When He is thought absent, He is seen; when He is present, He is not seen. Finally, not all the Apostles saw Christ. Therefore He says: "So long a time have I been with you, and you have not known me?"<sup>9</sup> But he who knew "what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and the charity of Christ which surpasseth all knowledge,"<sup>10</sup> saw both Christ and the Father.<sup>11</sup> For we do not now know Christ according to the flesh,<sup>12</sup> but according to the spirit. For "our breath, Christ the Lord, is taken from before our face,"<sup>13</sup> and may He deign in His mercy to fill us unto all the fullness of God,<sup>14</sup> that He may be able to be seen by us.'

### *Chapter 19*

If you understand these words, what else do you seek from me, since that question, which seemed so difficult, is now solved? But a distinction had been made between the sense of 'No one hath seen God at any time' and the manner in which those saints of old saw God, if those words were said

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8 Matt. 5.8.

9 John 14.9.

10 Eph. 3.18,19.

11 John 14.9.

12 2 Cor. 5.16.

13 Cf. Lam. 4.20.

14 Eph. 3.19.

because God is invisible: they saw—those of them who did see God—because to whomever He wished, and as He wished, He appeared in that form which His will chose, even as His nature remained hidden. For if, when the patriarchs saw God, His very nature appeared to them—although if He had not willed, doubtless it would not have appeared—how is it that no one has seen God at any time, when, at His will, His very nature was beheld by so many of the patriarchs, so that these words might be understood as spoken of God the Father, that no one has seen Him at any time? Ambrose certainly did not pass over his chance to refute certain heretics from this ground, namely the Photinians,<sup>1</sup> who assert that the Son of God took His beginning from the womb of the Virgin, and who refuse to believe that He had existed previously. But, because he saw others, that is, the Arians, promoting more dangerous views, whose error was undoubtedly included with that other, if the Father is invisible by nature, but the Son is believed to be visible, he asserted that both have one equally invisible nature, adding also the Holy Spirit. He conveyed this idea briefly but admirably when he subsequently said: ‘or certainly it is not possible to refute the argument that the Father or the Son, or at least the Holy Spirit, if, however, the Holy Spirit can be seen, are seen under the appearance which their will has chosen but which their nature has not formed.’<sup>2</sup> He could have said ‘their nature has not manifested,’ but he chose to say ‘formed,’ lest the aspect under which God chose to appear should be thought to have the form of His nature, and thereby an argument be made to prove that His substance is changeable and mutable. May the merciful and good God Himself keep this error far from the faith of His devout children!

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<sup>1</sup> Followers of Photinus of Sirmium in Pannonia, head of one of the numerous Arian sects claiming that the Son was not consubstantial with the Father.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. above, Ch. 18.

*Chapter 20*

Therefore, God is invisible by nature, and not only the Father, but also the Trinity itself, one God, and, because He is not only invisible but also unchangeable, He appears to whom He wills, and under the aspect that He wills, so that His invisible and unchangeable nature may remain wholly within Himself. But the longing of truly devout souls, by which they desire to see God and burn with eager love for Him, is not enkindled, I think, by desire to see that aspect under which He appears as He wills, but which is not Himself; they long for the substance by which He is what He is. The saintly Moses, His faithful servant, showed the flame of this desire of his when he said to God, with whom he spoke face to face as to a friend: 'If I have found favor before thee, show me thyself.'<sup>1</sup> What, then? Was it not Himself? If it were not Himself, he would not have said 'Show me thyself,' but 'Show me God'; yet, if he really beheld His nature and substance, he would have been far from saying 'show me thyself.' It was Himself, therefore, under that aspect in which He willed to appear, but He did not appear in His own nature which Moses longed to see, inasmuch as that is promised to the saints in another life. Hence, the answer made to Moses is true that no one can see the face of God and live,<sup>2</sup> that is, no one living in this life can see Him as He is. Many have seen, but they saw what His will chose, not what His nature formed, and this is what John said, if he is rightly understood: 'Dearly beloved, we are the sons of God, and it hath not yet appeared what we shall be. We know that when he shall appear, we shall be like to him, because we shall see him as he is';<sup>3</sup> not as men saw Him when He willed under the ap-

<sup>1</sup> Exod. 33.11-13 (Septuagint).

<sup>2</sup> Exod. 33.20.

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 3.2.

pearance that He willed; not in His nature under which He lies hidden within Himself even when He is seen, but as He is. This is what was asked of Him by the one who spoke to Him face to face, when he said to Him: 'Show me thyself,' but no one can at any time experience the fullness of God through the eyes of the body any more than by the mind itself.

### *Chapter 21*

It is one thing to see; it is something else to grasp the whole of something by seeing, since, indeed, a thing is seen when it is perceived as present in any way whatsoever, but the whole is grasped by seeing, when it is seen, so that no part of it escapes the notice, or when its outlines can be included in the view, as nothing of your will at present escapes your notice, or you can take in the span of your ring at a glance. I have instanced these two examples, the one referring to the glance of the mind, the other to the bodily eyes, for sight, as he<sup>1</sup> says, is to be referred to both, that is, to the eyes and the mind.

### *Chapter 22*

Moreover, if the reason why no one hath seen God at any time is, as the disputant<sup>1</sup> whose words we are examining says, because 'no one has beheld the fulness of His divinity, no one has experienced it with mind or eyes, for the word "has seen" is to be referred to both,' it remains for us to find out how the angels see God, because of that passage which I quoted from the Gospel: 'Their angels always see the face of

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<sup>1</sup> Ambrose; cf. above, Ch. 18.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*



my Father.’<sup>2</sup> If He appears to them not as He is, but under whatever aspect He wills, while His nature remains hidden, we have more and more need to inquire how we shall see Him as He is, as Moses desired to see Him when he asked God, who was then visible to him, to show him Himself. It is promised to us, as our supreme reward, at the resurrection, that we shall be like the angels of God,<sup>3</sup> and, if they do not see Him as He is, how shall we see Him, when we have become like to them at the resurrection? But, see what our Ambrose then says. ‘Finally,’ he says, ‘when this is added, “the only-begotten Son himself, he hath declared him,” it is the sight of minds rather than of eyes which is described. For beauty is seen, but virtue is declared; the former is grasped by the eyes, the latter by the mind.’<sup>4</sup> He had said shortly before that sight is to be referred to both; now he attributes it not to the mind, but to the eyes; yet I do not think he does it out of careless disregard of his own words, but because it is more usual for us in speaking to attribute sight to the eyes, as beauty to the body. Our habit of speaking applies this more frequently to things which are limited by space and distinguished by colors. But, if there were no beauty to be perceived by the mind, He would not be described as ‘beautiful in form above the sons of men.’<sup>5</sup> For this was not merely said according to the flesh, but also according to spiritual beauty. Therefore, beauty is used also as applying to the gaze of the mind, but, because it is more common to use it for corporeal objects or comparisons made with them, for that reason he said: ‘Beauty is seen, but virtue is declared; the former is grasped by the eyes, the latter by the mind.’ Thus, when the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, declares Him with an indescribable utterance, the rational being, pure and holy, is filled

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<sup>2</sup> Matt. 18.10.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 20.36; Matt. 22.30; Mark 12.25.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. above, Ch. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Ps. 44.3.

with the indescribable vision of God, which we shall attain when we have become like the angels; because it is true that no one has seen God at any time, in the sense in which visible things of the body, as known by the senses, are seen; since, if He has been seen at any time in that way, He is not seen according to His own nature, but is seen by appearing under that aspect which He wills, although that nature remains hidden and unchangeable within Him. In that way in which He is seen as He is, He is seen now, perhaps, by some of the angels; He will be seen thus by us when we have become like them.

### *Chapter 23*

Subsequently, when he had added that the heavenly powers, such as the seraphim, are not seen either except when they will and as they will, he did so to point out the depth of invisibility of the Trinity. 'However,' he says, 'even if we have no power of seeing, there is a grace of meriting that we may be able to see. Therefore, he that had the grace merited the occasion. We do not merit the occasion, because we have not the grace of seeing God.'<sup>1</sup> Obviously, by these words in which he is not teaching his own doctrine, but explaining the Gospel, he does not intend us to understand that some of them will see God, but some will not see Him; 'to them that believe he gave the power to be made the sons of God,'<sup>2</sup> since the following words apply to all: 'We shall see him as he is';<sup>3</sup> but by saying: 'we do not merit the occasion because we have not the grace of seeing God,' he shows that he is speaking of this world. Although God has deigned to appear here under the aspect which He willed, as to Abraham,<sup>4</sup> to Isaias,<sup>5</sup> and

<sup>1</sup> Cf. above, Ch. 18.

<sup>2</sup> John 1.12.

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 3.2.

<sup>4</sup> Gen. 18.1.

<sup>5</sup> Isa. 6.1.

others like him, to unnumbered others, although they belong to His people and His eternal inheritance, He shows Himself under no such appearance. But in the world to come, those who are to receive the kingdom which has been prepared for them from the beginning,<sup>6</sup> all the clean of heart, shall see Him, and in that kingdom there will be no others.

### *Chapter 24*

Notice, therefore, what he goes on to say about that world, beginning with: 'Is it any wonder that the Lord is not seen in the present world except when He wills? Even in the resurrection itself it is not easy to see God, except for the clean of heart; hence: "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God." If, then, those who are clean of heart will see God, doubtless others will not see Him; the unworthy will not see Him, nor will he who does not wish to see God be able to see Him.' You observe how guardedly he speaks at present of those who will see God in the world to come: It will not be everyone; only those who are worthy. For the worthy and the unworthy will rise again in that kingdom where God will be seen, since, 'all that are in the graves shall hear his voice . . . and come forth,' but with a great difference, 'for they that have done good things shall come forth unto the resurrection of life; but they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of judgment.'<sup>1</sup> This judgment means eternal punishment, according to this other saying: 'He that doth not believe, is already judged.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Matt. 25.34.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. John 5.28,29.

<sup>2</sup> John 3.18.

*Chapter 25*

When St. Ambrose said 'nor will he who does not wish to see God, be able to see Him,' what else does he wish us to infer but that he who is unwilling to devote to the cleansing of his heart an effort worthy of so great an aim does not wish to see God? Notice, then, that he adds: 'God is not seen in any locality, but in the clean heart.' Nothing could be more clearly, more forcefully, expressed. Therefore, without any shadow of doubt, the Devil and his angels, and all the wicked with them, are shut out from this vision, since they are not clean of heart. Consequently, from what is written in the Book of Job,<sup>1</sup> about the angels coming into the presence of God and the Devil coming with them, we are not to believe that the Devil saw God. It said that they came into God's presence, not God into their presence. The things which we see come into our presence, but not those by which we are seen. They came, therefore, as it reads in many versions of Scripture, 'to stand before the Lord,' not that God was before them. There is no need of dwelling on this point, to try to show in the measure of our ability how this also happens in time, since all things are always in the sight of God.

*Chapter 26*

We ask, now, how God is seen, not under that aspect by which He willed to appear to certain ones in that age, when He spoke not only to Abraham and other just men, but even to the murderer Cain,<sup>1</sup> but how He is seen in that kingdom where His sons will see Him as He is. Then, indeed, 'He will

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<sup>1</sup> Job 1.6; 2.1.

<sup>1</sup> Gen. 18.1; 4.

satisfy their desire with good things,<sup>2</sup> that desire with which Moses burned, which left him unsatisfied with speaking to God face to face,<sup>3</sup> and made him say: 'Show me thyself openly, that I may see thee,'<sup>4</sup> as if he were saying what is expressed about that desire in the psalm: 'I shall be satisfied when thy glory shall appear.'<sup>5</sup> With that desire, also, Philip burned and longed to be satisfied, when he said: 'Show us the Father and it is enough for us.'<sup>6</sup> Speaking of that vision, Ambrose, lover of God and man of desires, said: 'God is not seen in any locality,' as at the oak of Mambre, or on Mount Sinai, 'but in the clean heart,' and he continues, knowing what he longs and pines and hopes for: 'God is not sought by bodily eyes, through which He showed Himself to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others in this world, nor is He limited by our sight because of this saying, "Thou shalt see my back parts";<sup>7</sup> nor held by touch, as when He wrestled with Jacob;<sup>8</sup> nor heard by His utterance, as He was heard not only by so many saints but even by the Devil;<sup>9</sup> nor perceived in His approach, as formerly when He walked in Paradise at the afternoon air.'<sup>10</sup>

### *Chapter 27*

You see how the holy man tries to draw our minds away from all carnal senses, so as to render them fit to see God. Yet, what does such a one achieve externally, when he plants

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2 Ps. 102.5.

3 Exod. 33.11.

4 Exod. 33.13 (Septuagint).

5 Ps. 16.15.

6 John 14.8.

7 Exod. 33.23.

8 Gen. 32.24-30.

9 Gen. 3.14.

10 Gen. 3.8.

and waters, if God, 'who giveth the increase,'<sup>1</sup> does not work within? Without the help of the Spirit of God, who would be able to think that there is something, that it is greater than all the things which are experienced through the body, and that it is not seen in any locality, is not an object of search by the eyes, is not heard by its utterance, nor held by touch, nor perceived in its approach, yet is seen by the clean heart? When he said this, he was not speaking of this life, since he used the clearest kind of distinction, in differentiating the life of the world to come from that of the present world, in which God does not appear as He is, but under that aspect which He wills, and to whom He wills. He said: 'Is it any wonder that the Lord is not seen in this present world, except when He wills? In the resurrection itself it is not easy to see God, except for those who are clean of heart; hence: "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God." ' From here on he begins to speak of that world where all who rise again will not see God, but only those who rise to eternal life. The unworthy will not see Him, for of them it is said: 'Let the wicked be taken away lest he behold the brightness of the Lord';<sup>2</sup> but the worthy will see Him, and of such the Lord spoke when, though present, He was not seen, saying: 'He that loveth me keepeth my commandments, and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him and will manifest myself to him.'<sup>3</sup> Those to whom it will be said: 'Depart . . . into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels,'<sup>4</sup> shall not see Him; but those who will hear the words: 'Come, ye blessed of my Father, possess ye the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the

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1 1 Cor. 3.7.

2 Isa. 26.10 (Septuagint).

3 John 14.21,23.

4 Matt. 25.41.

world,<sup>6</sup> shall see Him. The former, indeed, 'shall go into everlasting burning, but the just into life everlasting.'<sup>6</sup> And what is life everlasting but that life which He describes elsewhere: 'Now this is eternal life, that they may know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou sent,'<sup>7</sup> the life in which He promises to those who love Him to show Himself as one God with His Father, not as He was seen by both good and bad in this world in the flesh?

### *Chapter 28*

At the future judgment, when He will so come as He was seen going into heaven,<sup>1</sup> that is, in the same form of Son of man, they will see that form and to them He will say: 'I was hungry and you gave me not to eat,'<sup>2</sup> because 'the Jews also shall look upon [Him] whom they have pierced,'<sup>3</sup> but shall not see that form of God in which 'He thought it not robbery to be equal with God.'<sup>4</sup> Those who will see Him as He is will then see Him in that form of God; but they will not see Him so because they were poor in spirit in this life or because they were meek, because they mourned, or hungered and thirsted after justice, or were merciful or peace-makers, but because they are clean of heart. There is this to stress among those beatitudes that, though those who have a clean heart may do everything else, the conclusion is not given, 'they shall see God,' except to the words, 'Blessed are the clean of heart.'<sup>5</sup>

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5 Matt. 25.34.

6 Matt. 25.46.

7 John 17.3.

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1 Acts 1.11.

2 Matt. 25.42.

3 Zach. 12.10.

4 Phil. 2.6.

5 Matt. 5.3-10.

Thus, He will be seen by the clean of heart, who is not seen in any locality, is not sought by bodily eyes, nor limited by our sight, nor held by touch, nor heard by His utterance, nor perceived in His approach. For 'no man hath seen God at any time,' either in this life as He is, or even in the life of the angels, as those visible things which are perceived by bodily sight, because 'the only-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.'<sup>6</sup> Therefore what He declares is said to belong to the sight of the mind, not to that of bodily eyes.

### *Chapter 29*

But, again, lest our desire should be transferred from one bodily sense to another, that is, from the eyes to the ears, when he had said: 'God is not sought by bodily eyes, nor limited by our sight, nor held by touch,' he also added: 'nor heard by His utterance,' so that, if we can, we are to understand that the only-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father declares Him inasmuch as He is the Word; not a sound echoing in our ears, but an image giving knowledge to our minds, that it may shine there with an inner, indescribable light. This is what was said to Philip in the words, 'He that seeth me, seeth the Father also,'<sup>1</sup> when he saw and did not see. Then Ambrose, whose longing for that vision was so exceptional, continues and says: 'When He is thought absent, He is seen, and when He is present, He is not seen.' He did not say 'When He is absent,' but 'when He is thought absent,' for He who fills heaven and earth<sup>2</sup> without being confined by limited space or spread through vast space is nowhere absent; He is everywhere wholly present, but contained in no

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<sup>6</sup> John 1.18.

<sup>1</sup> John 14.9.

<sup>2</sup> Jer. 23.24.



place. Whoever is transported beyond the bounds of his mind<sup>3</sup> to understand this sees God even when He is thought absent; whoever cannot do this should ask and strive to deserve to be able to do it. But let him not knock at the door of man, the arguer, to ask that he may read what he does not read, but at the door of God the Saviour, that he may be strengthened to do what he is now not strong enough to do. He subsequently makes clear to us why he said: 'And when He is present, He is not seen,' by adding: 'Finally, not all the Apostles saw Christ. Therefore He says: "So long a time have I been with you, and you have not known me?"' This is how God was present but was not seen.

### *Chapter 30*

Why did he not venture to say 'Finally, the Apostles did not see Christ,' instead of 'not all the Apostles,' as if some of them then saw by actual vision how He and the Father are one?<sup>1</sup> Or did he, perhaps, refer to that time when Peter said: 'Thou art Christ, the Son of the living God,' and received the answer: 'Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jona, because flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but my Father who is in heaven'?<sup>2</sup> And yet it does not seem clear to me whether that revelation was produced in his mind through his faith in believing so great a truth, or by a vision of something seen, since Peter was to show himself still so puny of faith as to fear the loss by death of the Son of the living God<sup>3</sup> whom so short a time before he had confessed.

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor. 5.13.

<sup>1</sup> John 10.30.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 16.16,17.

<sup>3</sup> Matt. 16.21,22.

*Chapter 31*

Another point that can trouble us is how it was possible for the very substance of God to be seen by some while still in this life, in view of what was said to Moses: 'No man can see my face and live,'<sup>1</sup> unless it is possible for the human mind to be divinely rapt from this life to the angelic life, before it is freed from the flesh by our common death. He who heard 'secret words which it is not granted to man to utter'<sup>2</sup> was so rapt that a certain turning away of his consciousness from the senses of this life took place, and he said he did not know 'Whether it was in the body or out of the body,' that is, as usually happens in advanced ecstasy, when the mind is removed from this life into that life without losing the tie of the body, or whether there is an entire separation, such as occurs in actual death. Thus it happens that this saying, 'No man can see my face and live,' is true, because the mind must necessarily be withdrawn from this life when it is caught up to the ineffable reality of that vision, and it is also not beyond belief that the perfection of that revelation was granted to certain saints, who were not yet near enough to death that their bodies were ready for burial. This, I think, was in the mind of the writer when he would not say 'the Apostles did not see Christ,' but said 'not all the Apostles saw Christ,' believing that the vision of the Godhead itself, of which he was speaking, could have been granted to some of them even then; in particular, blessed Paul, who, although he was, so to speak, the last of the Apostles, did not fail to speak of his own ineffable revelation.

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1 Exod. 33.20.

2 2 Cor. 12.2-4.

*Chapter 32*

Again, in ancient times, in the case of the faithful servant of God, Moses, who was destined to labor on this earth and to rule the chosen people, it would not be surprising that what he asked was granted: that he might see the glory of the Lord, to whom he said: 'If have found favor before thee, show me thyself openly.'<sup>1</sup> He received an answer adapted to present conditions, that he could not see the face of God, because no man could see Him and live; thus God made clear that the vision belongs to another and better life. In addition to that, the mystery of the future Church of Christ was foreshadowed by the words of God. Doubtless, Moses represented in himself the type of the Jewish people who would believe in Christ after His Passion, and that is why it says: 'When I shall pass, thou shalt see my back parts,'<sup>2</sup> and the rest which is there said, by an admirable mystery which foretells the Church to come. But it would take too long to discuss this now. However, as I had started to say, it is shown later in the Book of Numbers that even what he asked was granted to his desire, for there the Lord rebuked the sister of Moses for her obstinacy, and He said that He appeared to the other Prophets in a vision and in a dream, but to Moses plainly and not by riddles, and He added the words: 'And he saw the glory of the Lord.'<sup>3</sup> Why, then, did God make such an exception of him, if not, perhaps, that He considered him such a ruler of His people, so faithful a minister of His whole house, that he was worthy, even then, of that contemplation, so that, as he had desired, he saw God as He is; a contemplation promised to all His sons at the end of life?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Exod. 33.13.

<sup>2</sup> Exod. 33.21-23.

<sup>3</sup> Num. 12.6-8 (Septuagint).

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 3.2.

*Chapter 33*

I believe that holy man whose words we are examining was thinking of such things when he said: 'not all the Apostles saw Christ,' since some of them probably saw Him according to what I have said. But, to prove that not all of them saw Him, as he said, he at once adds: 'Therefore He said: "So long a time have I been with you and you have not known me?"' Then, explaining by what sort of men God is seen as He is in that contemplation, he says: 'He who knew "what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and the charity of Christ which surpasseth all knowledge," saw both Christ and the Father.'<sup>1</sup>

*Chapter 34*

I generally understand these words of the Apostle Paul thus: by the 'breadth,' all the good works of charity; by the 'length,' perseverance to the end; by the 'height,' hope of heavenly rewards; by the 'depth,' the unsearchable judgments of God,<sup>1</sup> from whom that grace has come to men. This interpretation I also adapt to the mystery of the Cross:<sup>2</sup> for the breadth I take the transverse beam on which the hands are stretched, because it signifies works; for the length, that part of the upright which extends from the transverse beam down into the earth, where the whole crucified Body was seen erect, which signifies to persevere, that is, to be steadfast and long-suffering; by the height, that part which extends upward from the transverse beam, where the Head is conspicuously seen, because of the expectation of heavenly things.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. above, Ch. 18.

<sup>1</sup> Letter 140.62.

<sup>2</sup> Letter 140.64.

This is to prevent us from believing that good works ought to be done and persevered in for the sake of the earthly and temporal favors of God, rather than for that heavenly and eternal good which 'faith that worketh by charity'<sup>3</sup> hopes for. By the depth I understand that part of the cross which is plunged into the hidden part of the earth and is not seen, but from which rises the whole part above, which is visible, just as man is called from the secret will of God to a share in such great grace, 'one after this manner, and another after that';<sup>4</sup> but that charity of Christ which surpasseth all knowledge is undoubtedly found where 'that peace is, which surpasseth all understanding.'<sup>5</sup> But, whether that defender of the Gospel sees this in these words of the Apostle, or whether he perhaps understands something more appropriate, you, at any rate, see, if I am not mistaken, that it is not inconsistent with the rule of faith.

### *Chapter 35*

Hence, we now take it in the sense of spiritual insight when he said: 'He who knew "what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and the charity of Christ which surpasseth all knowledge," saw both Christ and the Father'; and, lest it should seem to some dull-witted person that he was speaking of corporeal sight, he said: 'For we do not now know Christ according to the flesh, but according to the spirit. For "our breath, Christ the Lord is taken before our face." ' When he here says 'we know,' he speaks of our present knowledge by faith, not of our future knowledge by contemplation, because, whatever we know by 'unfeigned faith,'<sup>1</sup> even

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<sup>3</sup> Gal. 5.6.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor. 7.7.

<sup>5</sup> Phil. 4.7.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Tim. 1.5.

though we do not yet behold it by sight, we now hold by unshaken belief. Finally, after he had said that he does not 'now know Christ according to the flesh,' as the Apostle says, and had added the testimony of the Prophet: 'our breath, Christ the Lord is taken before our face,' he at once continued: 'may He deign in His mercy to fill us unto all the fullness of God, that He may be able to be seen by us.'<sup>2</sup> Certainly it is clear that in saying 'we know' he derived that knowledge from faith, by which the just man now lives,<sup>3</sup> and not from contemplation, by which we shall see God as He is.<sup>4</sup> This gift he wishes for himself and, consequently, for us, and he indicates that it will be ours by saying: 'May He deign, in His mercy, to fill us unto all the fullness of God, that He may be able to be seen by us.'

### *Chapter 36*

Some of the Apostles in their speech showed their understanding of this fullness of God, in the sense of thinking that we shall become entirely what God is. These words, as you recall, the Apostle expressed in this way when he said: 'To know also the charity of Christ which surpasseth all knowledge, that you may be filled unto all the fullness of God.'<sup>1</sup> Therefore, they say, if we have anything less than God has, and are less than He is in any respect, how shall we be filled unto all the fullness of God? But, when we are filled, surely we shall be equal to Him. You are revolted and you turn with loathing from that error of the human mind, I am sure, and you are right. Later, if God wills and in proportion

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. above, Ch. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Hab. 2.4; Rom. 1.17; Gal. 3.11; Heb. 10.38.

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 3.2.

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<sup>1</sup> Eph. 3.19.

to the strength He gives, we shall discuss the way in which that fullness is to be understood, according to which it is said that we are to be filled unto all the fullness of God.

### *Chapter 37*

Now, note carefully and recall what has been said, so as to see whether I have explained what you submitted to me, and what seemed difficult to explain. If you ask whether God can be seen, I answer: He can. If you ask how I know, I answer that we read in Scripture, the source of truth: 'Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God,'<sup>1</sup> and other passages of like tenor. If you ask how He is said to be invisible if He can be seen, I answer that He is invisible by nature, but He is seen when He wills and as He wills. He has been seen by many, not as He is, but under such aspect as it pleased Him to appear. If you ask how even the wicked Cain saw Him,<sup>2</sup> when he was questioned by Him about his crime, and judged; or how even the Devil himself saw Him when he came with angels to stand before Him,<sup>3</sup> if it is true that the clean of heart are blessed because they shall see God, I answer that it does not necessarily follow that those who sometimes hear words uttered by Him also see Him. Those who heard Him when He said to His Son: 'I have both glorified it and will glorify it again'<sup>4</sup> did not see Him, but it is not surprising that even some who are not clean of heart see God under the appearance which His will makes possible, while His invisible nature, remaining unchanged within itself, is still hidden. If you ask whether He can also be seen at any time as He is, I answer that this

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. 5.8.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 4.6-15.

<sup>3</sup> Job 1.6; 2.1.

<sup>4</sup> John 12.28.

was promised to His sons, of whom it is said: 'We know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.'<sup>5</sup> If you ask by what means we shall see Him, I answer: as the angels see, for we shall then be equal to them;<sup>6</sup> as the angels see those things which are called visible; but no man hath ever seen God nor can see Him, because 'He inhabiteth light inaccessible,'<sup>7</sup> and His nature is invisible as it is immortal. This the Apostle asserts in a similar passage when he says: 'Now to the king of ages, invisible and immortal,'<sup>8</sup> because, as He is now immortal and will never afterward be mortal, so He is not only now but always invisible. 'For he is not seen in any locality, but in the clean heart; He is not sought by bodily eyes, nor limited by our sight, nor held by touch, not heard by His utterance, nor perceived in His approach. But the only-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father'<sup>9</sup> without sound of words declares the nature and substance of the Godhead, and therefore to eyes that are worthy and fit for such appearance He shows it invisibly. Those are the eyes of which the Apostle says: 'the eyes of your heart enlightened,'<sup>10</sup> and of which it is said: 'Enlighten my eyes that I never sleep in death.'<sup>11</sup> For the Lord is a spirit;<sup>12</sup> therefore, 'he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit.'<sup>13</sup> Consequently, he who can see God invisibly can be joined to God incorporeally.

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5 1 John 3.2.

6 Matt. 18.10; Luke 20.36.

7 1 Tim. 6.16.

8 1 Tim. 1.17.

9 John 1.18.

10 Eph. 1.18.

11 Ps. 12.4.

12 2 Cor. 3.17; John 4.24.

13 1 Cor. 6.17.



*Chapter 38*

I think there is nothing further to ask in the question which you have proposed to me. But examine in this whole discussion of ours what you have seen, what you have believed, what you still do not know, either because I have not spoken of it, or you have not understood, or you have not judged it credible. Among the points which you have seen to be true, distinguish further how you saw them: whether it was by recalling that you had seen them through the body, such as heavenly or earthly bodies, or whether you never perceived them by corporeal sight, but, by looking upon them with your mind only, observed that they are true and certain, such as your own will, about which I believe you when you speak, for it is true I cannot see it myself as it is seen by you. And when you have distinguished between these two, notice, too, how you make your distinction. Although we see some things with the body, others with the mind, the distinction between these two sorts of sight is seen by the mind, not the body. The objects which are beheld by the mind have need of no senses of the body to let us know that they are true, but those perceived through the body cannot be included in our knowledge if there is no mind to which these incoming messages can be referred. And it is a fact that those incoming messages, which it is said, in some wise, to receive, are left outside, but it forms images of them, that is, incorporeal likenesses of physical things, which it commits incorporeally to the memory, so that from there, when it has the will or power, it may give judgment on them, after bringing them out of custody and displaying them in the sight of its thought. And when it has its full powers, it also makes a distinction between these two: what it left outside in its corporeal aspect, what it beholds within as a likeness, and it discerns that the former is not there, but the

latter is. In the same way you think of my corporeal face, while I am absent; the image is present to you, but the face whose image it is is absent; the one is body, the other the incorporeal likeness of body.

### *Chapter 39*

Note this, therefore, after you have carefully and faithfully examined and distinguished what you see; in making your distinction assess the actual weight of evidence on what you believe in this whole speech which I have been making to you, since I began to speak to you in this letter, and in it note to what extent you lend your faith to what you do not see. You do not put the same faith in me as you do in Ambrose, from whose books I have drawn this weighty testimony; or if you do think that we are both to be weighed in the same balance, of course you will not compare us in any way with the Gospel, or put our writings on the same footing with the canonical Scriptures. Obviously, if you are wise enough to distinguish correctly, you see that we fall far short of that authority, and that I fall even farther; however much credibility you assign to both of us, you compare us in vain to that high standard. Therefore, that saying: 'No man has seen God at any time,'<sup>1</sup> and: 'He inhabits light inaccessible, whom no man hath seen nor can see,'<sup>2</sup> and: 'Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God,'<sup>3</sup> and other passages from the sacred books which I have cited—all these you believe more firmly than what Ambrose said: 'God is not seen in any locality, He is not sought by bodily eyes, nor limited by our sight, nor held by touch, nor heard

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 4.12.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Tim. 6.16.

<sup>3</sup> Matt. 5.8.

by His utterance, nor perceived in His approach.' Doubtless, he understood or believed that God, who is seen by the clean of heart, is such as that, and I confess that this is also my opinion.

### *Chapter 40*

Therefore, you yield faith to these words in one way, but to the divine words in quite a different way. Perhaps some little doubt has crept into your mind about us; that we may be somewhat less than clear about some of the divine words, and that they are interpreted by us, not as they were said, but as we imagine them. Perhaps you are saying to yourself: What if God is seen by the clean of heart, and is also visible in some locality? Or: What if the clean of heart will see God even with bodily eyes, when this corruptible shall put on incorruption,<sup>1</sup> when we shall be like the angels of God?<sup>2</sup> Perhaps you do not know how far you ought or ought not to believe us, and you are on guard not to be led astray by believing us either more or less than you ought. About the divine Scriptures, however, even when they are not clearly understood, you have no doubt that they are to be believed. But you surely observe and see this weighing of belief or non-belief, and the difficulty of knowing, and the storms of doubt, and the devout faith which is owed to the divine utterances; all these you see in your mind as they are, and you do not doubt in the least that they are in your mind in this way, either as I said them, or, preferably, as you knew them yourself. Therefore, you see your faith, you see your doubt, you see your desire and will to learn, and when you are led by divine authority to believe what you do not see,

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 15.33.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 20.36.

you see at once that you believe these things; you analyze and distinguish all this.

### *Chapter 41*

Of course, you will not make any sort of comparison between your bodily eyes and these eyes of your heart, with which you perceive that all this is true and certain, with which you observe and distinguish what is invisibly present to you; especially when, from these same visible things which are, in a sense, reflected by the sight of the bodily eyes, and from these same bodily eyes and their faculty of sight, of whatever kind and degree it may be, you estimate what a difference there is between them and the invisible things. I do not mean the higher ones in which you must believe even though they are not seen, but those, as I have said, which are mentally perceived as present—not the ones which require belief because of their absence—and which are seen with the interior eyes, not with those same eyes of flesh. Since, then, the interior eyes are judges of the exterior ones, and the latter are subject to the former, so to speak, in their duty and ministry of bringing in information; and since the former see many things which the latter do not see, while the latter see nothing which is not submitted to the judgment of the former, acting as president of the tribunal, would anybody fail to prefer the former to the latter as being incomparably superior?

### *Chapter 42*

In view of all this, I ask you whether you think you are acting in darkness or in light when this great operation is

taking place in you by which you distinguish interior things from exterior and, without noise of words, prefer the former to the latter; when you leave the exterior ones outside and dwell within, among the interior ones, estimating them by computing their incorporeal limits? My opinion is that such great, such high, such true, manifest, and certain things cannot be seen without light. Look upon that light, therefore, in which you behold all other things, and see whether any glance of bodily eyes can draw near to it. Obviously, it cannot. Notice, also, and answer whether you see in it any dimensions or limits of space. You will find no such thing there, I think, if you are careful to exclude from your inner vision whatever corporeal images the senses of the outer man bring in. But perhaps it is difficult, because, after the fashion of our carnal life, a host of fantasies in the likeness of material objects rushes in on those interior eyes, also; and when I made at least an attempt to resist them, I cried out in anguish in that short letter of mine,<sup>1</sup> relying on divine authority, and I said: 'Let flesh, drunk with carnal thoughts, hear this: God is a spirit.'<sup>2</sup> By that reproach I was restraining my own mind from that sort of vanity rather than anyone else's. We are indeed more readily drawn to what is customary, and our soul, in its weakness, likes to bring in or allow worldly intercourse to enter, not in order to rouse itself to health, but out of indulgence, and to give itself some sort of rest in its weariness.

### *Chapter 43*

Therefore, if you are unable to clear the eye of your mind entirely of this seeming cloud of corporeal images, examine

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<sup>1</sup> Letter 92.5. This letter, addressed to Italica, dealt with this same subject, but in less detail.

<sup>2</sup> John 4.24.

them carefully within yourself. Look at heaven and earth in your thought, as you have been wont to look at them with your bodily eyes, and notice that these images of heaven and earth, which are set out before the eyes of your thought, are the likenesses of objects, not the objects themselves. Give judgment, then, against yourself, in your own favor, if you are unable to drive from the eye of your mind these manifold fanciful images of corporeal qualities, and win the victory from your own defeat. For, no one, to my way of thinking, is so carried away by such imaginings as to believe that he holds in his memory or in his mental vision the sun, moon, stars, rivers, seas, mountains, hills, cities, in a word, the walls of his house or even of his sleeping-room, and whatever else he has knowledge of or experiences through his bodily eyes, as they are in their dimensions or limitations of space, whether they are still or in movement. Moreover, if those images in our mind, which resemble bodies or spaces, yet are not confined by spatial relations or limits and are not stored in our memory with spaces between them, how much less likely that those things which bear no resemblance to physical objects: 'charity, joy, peace, longanimity, benignity, goodness, faith, mildness, continency,'<sup>1</sup> should take up room, be separated by intervening spaces, or that the eyes of the heart should seek out any such spaces so as to send out their rays and thus see these things! Are not all these things together without effort, and are they not known by their own limits, without any surrounding space? Tell me, in what place you see charity, which nevertheless is known to you only inasmuch as you can perceive it with your mental gaze. You do not know it as great because you survey it as if you were looking at a gigantic mass; when it speaks within you, bidding you live by it, it does not shout with any sound of voice; you do not lift up the sight of your bodily eyes in order to see it; you do not strain the

<sup>1</sup> Gal. 5.22,23. These virtues are in a different order in the Vulgate.

strength of your bodily sinews in order to lay hold of it firmly; and when it comes into your mind you do not perceive its approach.

### *Chapter 44*

This, then, is charity, however small a thing it appears to us, as it inheres in our will; 'it is not seen in any locality, nor sought by bodily eyes, nor limited by our sight, nor held by touch, nor heard by its utterance, nor perceived in its approach.'<sup>1</sup> How much more true this is of God, of whom charity is the pledge within us! If our interior man is an image of Him—insignificant, indeed—not begotten of Him but created by Him, and, although it is still renewed day by day,<sup>2</sup> it now dwells in such light that no faculty of corporeal sight comes near to it, and if those things which we perceive with the eyes of the heart by means of that light are distinguished from each other and separated by no intervals of space, how much more is this true of God, who inhabits light inaccessible<sup>3</sup> to the bodily senses, to whom there can be no approach save for the clean of heart! Since, then, we have chosen that light in preference to any corporeal light, not only by the judgment of our reason, but also by the longing of our love, we shall make better progress in that love the stronger we become in it, until all the infirmities of our soul shall be healed by Him<sup>4</sup> who becomes merciful toward our iniquities. Having become spiritual men in this more living life, we shall be able to judge all things, but ourselves be judged by no man;<sup>5</sup> 'But the sensual man perceiveth not these things that are of the Spirit

<sup>1</sup> Cf. above, Ch. 18.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Cor. 4.16.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Tim. 6.16.

<sup>4</sup> Ps. 102.3.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor. 2.15.

of God, for it is foolishness to him, and he cannot understand, because it is spiritually examined.<sup>6</sup>

### *Chapter 45*

But, if we cannot yet prefer the light which judges to the light which is judged, or prefer the life of the mind to the life of sense-experience only, or prefer the nature which is not different in different places, but which has everything which it possesses in unity—such as our intellect is—to that nature which is made up of parts, so that the half is less than the whole—such as our bodies are—then it is useless for us to discuss such great and high topics. But, if we can now do this, let us believe that God is something greater than our intellect, so that His peace, ‘which surpasseth all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.’<sup>1</sup> For, that peace which surpasses all understanding is certainly not inferior to our mind, so that it should be considered visible to our bodily eyes, although the mind itself is invisible. Or is it true that the peace of God is different from the ‘brightness of his glory,’<sup>2</sup> although that is the same as the only-begotten Son, and that charity which surpasses knowledge is His, too, with which knowledge ‘we shall be filled unto all the fulness of God,’<sup>3</sup> and that it is inferior to the light of our mind, which is bestowed by His enlightening act? But, if this light is inaccessible to fleshly eyes, how incomparably superior is that light! Consequently, since something of us is visible, like the body, and something invisible, like the interior man, and since the best part of us, that is, the mind and intelligence, is

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6 1 Cor. 2.14.

1 Phil. 4.7.

2 Heb. 1.3.

3 Eph. 3.19.



invisible to the eyes of the body, how shall that which is better than the best part of us be visible to our lower part?

### *Chapter 46*

I think you now agree, after considering all these arguments, that it is correct to say that 'God is not seen in any locality, but in the clean heart; He is not sought by bodily eyes, nor limited by our sight, nor held by touch, nor heard by His utterance, nor perceived in His approach.' If there is anything of this which we do not understand, or about which we are 'otherwise minded, this also God will reveal to us if, whereunto we are come, we continue in the same.'<sup>1</sup> For we have come to believe that God is not body, but spirit;<sup>2</sup> we have come also to believe that 'no man hath seen God at any time';<sup>3</sup> and that 'God is light and in him there is no darkness';<sup>4</sup> and that 'with him there is no change nor shadow of alteration';<sup>5</sup> and that 'He inhabiteth light inaccessible, whom no man hath seen nor can see';<sup>6</sup> and that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are one God,<sup>7</sup> without any diversity or separateness of nature, and the clean of heart will see Him;<sup>8</sup> and that 'we shall be like to him, because we shall see him as he is';<sup>9</sup> and that 'God is charity and he that abideth in charity, abideth in God and God in him';<sup>10</sup> and that we ought to 'follow peace and holiness, without which no

<sup>1</sup> Phil. 3.15,16.

<sup>2</sup> John 4.24.

<sup>3</sup> John 1.18.

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 1.5.

<sup>5</sup> James 1.17.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Tim. 6.16.

<sup>7</sup> 1 John 5.7,8.

<sup>8</sup> Matt. 5.8.

<sup>9</sup> 1 John 3.2.

<sup>10</sup> 1 John 4.16.

man shall see God';<sup>11</sup> and that this corruptible and mortal body of ours shall be changed at the resurrection, and shall put on incorruption and immortality;<sup>12</sup> and that 'it is sown a natural body, it shall rise a spiritual body,'<sup>13</sup> when the Lord will 'reform the body of our lowliness' and make it 'like to the body of his glory';<sup>14</sup> and that God 'made man to his image and likeness';<sup>15</sup> and that we are renewed in the spirit of our mind unto the knowledge of God 'according to the image of him that created us.'<sup>16</sup> Those who walk by faith<sup>17</sup> according to these and other similar authoritative pronouncements of the holy Scriptures, who have made spiritual progress by an understanding divinely given or strengthened, and who have been able to assess the value of spiritual things, have seen that the mental sight is superior to the bodily sight, and that the objects of this mental vision are not limited by space; they are not separated from each other by intervening spaces and their parts are not less than the whole.

### *Chapter 47*

This is why he made the statement so confidently that 'God is not seen in any locality, but in the clean heart, that He is not sought by bodily eyes, nor limited by our sight, nor held by our touch nor heard by His utterance nor perceived in His approach.' Hence, as His invisible substance is praised in the holy Scriptures, yet it is revealed in the same authorities that He has been seen by many in the body, and in corporeal places; or else in the spirit, through which corporeal images

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11 Heb. 12.14.

12 1 Cor. 15.53.

13 1 Cor. 15.44.

14 Phil. 3.21.

15 Gen. 1.26,27.

16 Col. 3.10.

17 2 Cor. 5.7.

are perceived, in some likeness however incorporeal, of the body, as happens in sleep or in ecstasy, that saintly man<sup>1</sup> differentiated this sort of visions from the nature of God, and said that they represented the forms which His will chose, not that which His nature presented. For God causes those visions in which He appears, as He wills, to whom He wills and when He wills, while His substance remains hidden and unchangeable in itself. If our will, remaining in itself, and without any change in itself, expresses words through which it manifests itself, after a fashion, how much more easily can the omnipotent God, maintaining His nature hidden and unchangeable, appear under any form He wills and to whom He wills, since He made all things out of nothing,<sup>2</sup> and remaining in Himself, 'reneweth all things.'<sup>3</sup>

### *Chapter 48*

But, in order to attain that vision by which we see God as He is, He has warned us that our hearts must be cleansed. As then objects are called visible in our fashion of speaking, so God is called invisible<sup>1</sup> lest He be thought to be a material body, yet He will not deprive pure hearts of the contemplation of His substance, since this great and sublime reward is promised, on the Lord's own word, to those who worship and love God. At the time when He appeared visibly to bodily eyes, He promised that His invisible being also would be seen by the clean of heart: 'He that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself

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1 St. Ambrose.

2 2 Macc. 7.28.

3 Wisd. 7.27.

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1 Col. 1.15; Tim. 1.17.

to him.<sup>2</sup> It is certain that this nature of His, which He shares with the Father, is equally invisible as it is equally incorruptible,<sup>3</sup> which, as was said above, the Apostle at once set forth as the divine substance, commending it to men with what words he could. But, if bodily eyes behold it, in virtue of the changed nature of bodies at the resurrection, let those who can assert this look to it; for my part, I am more impressed by the statement of him who attributes this to clean hearts, not to bodily eyes, even at the resurrection.

### *Chapter 49*

I do not refuse to learn something further, or to investigate the problem of the spiritual body which is promised to those who will rise again, if, in our discussion of the matter, we may succeed in avoiding the faults which are commonly stirred to life by human aims and controversies, provided that, 'above that which is written, that one be not puffed up for another, against the other,'<sup>1</sup> lest, while we seek to discover by argument how God can be seen, we lose that very peace and holiness, 'without which no man shall see God.'<sup>2</sup> May He keep this far from our hearts; may He make and keep them clean so that they may contemplate Him! However, as I do not doubt, so also I do not seek into the truth that the nature of God is never seen in any place. But now, as to whether anything can be seen by our bodily eyes without being seen in a place, I am ready to listen with peace and charity to those who are able to make it clear by proof, and to share with them my own conviction. There are some who take for granted that

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<sup>2</sup> John 14.21.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Tim. 1.17.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 4.6.

<sup>2</sup> Heb. 12.14.

God Himself is wholly corporeal, and they suppose that whatever is not corporeal is not substance at all. I think that these are to be avoided altogether. But there are others who agree fully that God Himself is not corporeal, and they think that those who will rise again to eternal life therefore will see God even in the body, since they hope that the spiritual body will be such that even what was flesh before will become spirit. I think it will be easy to judge how much this opinion differs from the former, and how much more tenable it is, even if it is not true: first, because it makes a great difference whether something contrary to truth is believed about the Creator or about a creature; secondly, because the effort of the mind when it aims to change matter into spirit may be tolerable, but not when it changes God into matter; finally, because what I said in my other letter,<sup>3</sup> regarding the eyes of our flesh, that they can neither see God now, nor will they be able to later, is true even so; for it was said solely of bodily eyes, which they will not be then if the body itself becomes a spirit, because when He is seen it will be a spirit, not a body that will see Him.

### *Chapter 50*

Therefore, the whole question that now remains is about the spiritual body: how far this corruptible and mortal one will put on incorruption and immortality, and how far it will be changed from animal to spiritual.<sup>1</sup> This question deserves to be treated more carefully and more attentively, especially because of the body of the Lord Himself, 'who reforms the body of our lowliness, made like to the body of his glory,' that He may be able 'to subdue all things unto himself.'<sup>2</sup> Since,

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<sup>3</sup> Letter 92.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 15.53.

<sup>2</sup> Phil. 3.21.

then, God the Father sees the Son, and the Son sees the Father, undoubtedly we should not listen to those who will attribute vision only to bodies. Neither is it right to say that the Father does not see the Son, or that, if vision belongs only to bodies, He is endowed with a body in order to see. How shall we explain the fact that at the beginning of the world, before the Son had taken on the form of a servant,<sup>3</sup> 'God saw the light, that it was good,' and the firmament and the sea and the dry land, and every herb and every tree, the sun, the moon, the stars, all living creatures that move upon the earth, the fowls of the air, the living soul? 'And afterward God saw all the things that he had made and behold they were very good.'<sup>4</sup> After Scripture had repeated that so many times about all the several creatures, I wonder how that opinion could have arisen whereby sight is thought to belong to bodies only. But, from whatever habit of speech that opinion may have come, the holy Scriptures are not accustomed to speak thus; they attribute vision not only to the body, but also to the spirit, and more to the spirit than to the body. Otherwise they would not have been right in giving the name 'seers' to the prophets who saw the future, not by bodily but by spiritual sight.<sup>5</sup>

### *Chapter 51*

But we must take thought not to venture into what is contrary to custom, by saying that through the glory of resurrection the body puts off not only its mortal and corruptible state, but even the very state of being a body, and becomes a spirit. In that case, either the substance of the spirit is

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<sup>3</sup> Phil. 2.7.

<sup>4</sup> Gen. 1.4-31.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Kings 9.9.

doubled, if the body becomes spirit, or, if the spirit of man is single, so as not to be doubled by the addition of another as a twin, when the body is changed and turned into spirit, and if it is not increased by any addition, it is to be feared that we are then saying nothing else than that bodies will not remain immortal after that change, but will cease to exist and will perish entirely. Therefore, until we examine carefully and discover, with the Lord's help, what the more probable opinion is about the spiritual body, which according to the Scriptures is promised at the resurrection, let it be enough for us meanwhile that the only-begotten Son, who is also the 'Mediator of God and men, the man, Christ Jesus,'<sup>1</sup> sees the Father as He is seen by the Father. For our part, let us not try to carry over that concupiscence of the eyes from this world to that vision of God, which is promised to us at the resurrection,<sup>2</sup> but let us strive for it with devout affection by cleansing our hearts, and let us not think of a corporeal face when the Apostle says: 'We see now through a glass, in a dark manner, but then face to face'; especially as the Apostle adds more definitely: 'now I know in part, but then I shall know even as I am known.'<sup>3</sup> If we shall then know God by a corporeal face, we are known to Him now by a corporeal face, 'for then I shall know,' he says, 'even as I am known.' From this, who would not understand that in this passage he meant our face, of which he says in another place: 'But we, beholding the glory of the Lord with open face, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory as by the spirit of the Lord,'<sup>4</sup> that is, from the glory of faith to the glory of eternal contemplation? No doubt this is effected by that transformation by which the 'inward man is renewed day

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1 1 Tim. 2.5.

2 1 John 2.16.

3 1 Cor. 13.12.

4 2 Cor. 3.18.

by day.’<sup>5</sup> The Apostle Peter was also referring to this when he warned of a wife’s adornment, and said: ‘Whose adorning let it not be the outward plaiting of the hair, or the wearing of gold and pearls, or fine apparel, but the hidden man of the heart which is rich in the sight of God.’<sup>6</sup> By not going over to Christ, the Jews keep a veil over that face, since, when anyone does go over to Christ, the veil will be taken away, and ‘we with open face are transformed into the same image.’ Moreover, he says very plainly: ‘The veil is upon their heart.’<sup>7</sup> There, then, is the face that shall be opened, and, although now we see through a glass in a dark manner, we shall then see face to face.

### *Chapter 52*

If you agree, take up with me the statement of the holy man, Ambrose, which is founded, not on his authority, but on truth itself. My reason for liking it is not because the Lord freed me from error by his words, and granted me the grace of saving baptism by his ministry, as if I should be too partial to the one who planted and watered me,<sup>1</sup> but because, in this matter, he said what God who giveth the increase says to the soul which meditates devoutly and understands rightly. He said then: ‘Even in the resurrection itself it is not easy to see God, except for those who are clean of heart; hence: “Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God.” How many kinds of blessed He had enumerated, yet to none of them had He promised the ability to see God! If, then, those who are clean of heart will see God, doubtless others will not see Him; the unworthy will not see Him, nor will

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<sup>5</sup> 2 Cor. 4.16.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. 1 Peter 3.3,4.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Cor. 3.15.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 3.7.



he who does not wish to see God be able to see Him. God is not seen in any locality, but in the clean heart; He is not sought by bodily eyes, nor limited by our sight, nor held by touch, nor heard by His utterance, nor perceived in His approach. When He is thought absent, He is seen; when He is present, He is not seen. Finally, not all the Apostles saw Christ. Therefore He says: "So long a time have I been with you, and you have not known me?" But he who knew "what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and the charity of Christ which surpasseth all knowledge," saw both Christ and the Father. For we do not now know Christ according to the flesh, but according to the spirit. For "our breath, Christ the Lord, is taken before our face," and may He in His mercy deign to fill us unto all the fullness of God, that we may be able to see Him.<sup>2</sup>

### *Chapter 53*

To the extent that you understand these words of the saintly man, which are not carnal but spiritual, and recognize that they are true, not because he said them but because truth clamors in them without noise of words, to that extent you understand how you may cling to God, to that extent you prepare yourself inwardly as the incorporeal place of His dwelling, to hear the silence of His discourse, and to see His invisible form. Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God, not when He shall appear to them as a body coming from some intervening space, but when He shall come to them and make His dwelling with them, and thus they shall be filled unto all the fullness of God—not that they will be God in His fullness, but that they shall be perfectly filled with God. But, if we think of nothing but

<sup>2</sup> Cf. above, Ch. 18.

corporeal objects, and we cannot even think worthily of the source of our thought about corporeal objects, let us not seek reproaches to make against ourselves; rather, let us cleanse our hearts of this carnal tendency by prayer and by turning to what lies before us. Let me tell you not only what blessed Ambrose but also what holy Jerome said: 'The eyes of the flesh can no more behold the divinity of the Father than they can that of the Son and the Holy Spirit, because there is one nature in the Trinity, but the eyes of the mind can, and of them the Saviour Himself said: "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God."<sup>1</sup> And according to the brief and true definition of the same Jerome: 'An incorporeal thing is not seen by corporeal eyes.'<sup>2</sup>

#### *Chapter 54*

My reason for inserting these opinions of such great men on such a great subject was not to make you think that anyone's interpretation should be accepted with the authority due to the canonical Scripture, but that those who are otherwise minded may try to see with their mind what is true, and to seek God in the simplicity of their heart,<sup>1</sup> and cease to find fault so rashly with the learned expounders of the divine words. And do not be influenced by any who say, without sufficient reflection: 'What then will the bodily eyes see if they will not see God? Will they be blind or useless?' Those who say this do not realize that if there are to be no bodies, there will be no bodily eyes, but if there are to be bodies there will be something for bodily eyes to see. But let

<sup>1</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Isaias* 6.1 (PL 24.93).

<sup>2</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Job* 42.5 (PL 26.1262) and *Commentary on Zacharias* 24.11 (PL 26.792).

<sup>1</sup> Wisd. 1.1.

this be enough to say, and when you consider, after reading and rereading all of it from the beginning of my treatise, you will probably perceive with certainty that a clean heart ought to prepare you, with His help, to see God. As for the spiritual body, I will try in another work to see what arguments I can find with the Lord's help.<sup>2</sup>

*148. A memorandum to his holy brother, Fortunatianus<sup>1</sup>  
(413)*

I now remind you of what I asked at our meeting, that you would be so kind as to see our brother,<sup>2</sup> of whom we spoke, and ask him to pardon me if he took any rather strong and emphatic remark of mine as directed against him in that letter, which I do not regret having written, in such way as to say that the eyes of this body do not see God and will not see Him. As a matter of fact, I added the reason why I said this: namely, to prevent the belief that God is Himself corporeal or visible in any locality or space relation—for the eye of this body can see in no other way—and also to prevent that expression, 'face to face,'<sup>3</sup> from being taken to mean that God is limited by the parts of a body. Therefore, I do not regret having said this, because we should not have such an irreverent idea of God as to imagine that, instead of

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<sup>2</sup> *De civitate Dei* 22.29. In *Retractations* 2.41, Augustine says of the subject treated in this letter: 'I have written a book on the Vision of God, in which I undertook a careful examination of the future nature of the spiritual body at the resurrection of the saints, and whether and how God, who is a spirit, can be seen by a body; but that very difficult question at the end I explained as best I could in Book 22 of *The City of God*.'

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop of Sicca, one of the seven chosen to debate with the Donatists at the Conference of Carthage (411).

<sup>2</sup> A brother bishop, not named, but suspected of anthropomorphism.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 13.12.