

## AUGUSTINE, SEEKER AFTER TRUTH

JORDAN AUMANN, O.P.

---

"I 'sought' Him, down the nights and down the days;  
I 'sought' Him, down the arches of the years;  
I 'sought' Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
Of my own mind; . . . . ."

The Hound of Heaven.



THE STORY of St. Augustine's quest after truth reads like a romance and it might well be that the poet had the Bishop of Hippo in mind when he penned those lines. For fourteen years Augustine sought for truth and in that time turned successively to Manicheism, Scepticism, Neo-Platonism only to discover that his searching was in vain. Finally he turned to the Scriptures and there, by the light of faith, he found that truth which he had so earnestly sought.

As a young student of nineteen Augustine first received the urge to seek after truth of which God must be the ultimate source. The custom of the schools of rhetoric at that time was to read aloud passages from the works of the Roman masters and it was on such an occasion that the heart of the young student, enmeshed in worldliness and sensuality, felt a thrill of delight as he listened to Cicero's *Hortensius*. Many times before he had experienced this same feeling when as a child he had listened to his mother, Monica, speak to him of God and His love for man. The similarity between the pagan philosopher and Christian teaching startled him. If there were a real connection here, then there must be something of truth in Christianity, something common to all mankind. Is this what Christ meant when He said, "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free"? But Cicero, although he wrote in glowing terms about truth, offered no method for attaining it.

Augustine then read eagerly all the books that he could obtain on music, rhetoric, mathematics and geography. The work of Aristotle on the categories which he considered "great and almost divine" caused him little trouble. This seems to be the extent of Augustine's acquaintance with Aristotle whom he calls "vir excellentis ingenii et eloquii Platoni quidem impar."<sup>1</sup>

For nine years Augustine followed the Manichean thinkers in

the hope that they would be able to explain all things as they professed. Their theory that evil was a distinct power constantly at war with the good offered a possible explanation for the struggle he experienced against his concupiscence. But here again Augustine was to taste disappointment because the Manichees offered no remedy for overcoming this evil. On the contrary, Augustine soon realized that "the changeful implies the changeless, corruption the incorruptible, and again that what can become corrupted must needs at the outset be good."<sup>2</sup> He finally gave up the teaching of the Manichees when in an interview with Faustus, its foremost exponent, he was able to receive no satisfactory answer to his objections.

Then, in his floundering, Augustine hit upon the New Academy but here, too, his search ended in failure. True, they considered the search for truth to be all-important but at the same time they made this search futile in that they denied the ability of the human mind to attain it. If, as Cicero has taught, happiness depends upon the possession of truth, there must be some way of arriving at it. Cicero never found the way nor did Carneades who declared that the most we can know is what is probable. This theory obviously destroys the foundations of all morality since plausible reasons can be found for almost any sort of human conduct. What Augustine had said about Epicurus would apply here: "to my mind Epicurus should have won the garland, had I not believed that the life of the soul and the reward of our deeds do continue after death, which Epicurus would not believe."

It was in the writings of the Platonists and especially those of Plotinus that Augustine was to find "una verissimae philosophiae disciplina." Here it seemed to Augustine that all the discrepancies in the various schools of philosophy were reconciled. Porphyrius, a student of Plotinus, had collected the literary works of his master into six volumes for the benefit of posterity and these, in turn, had been translated by the Roman orator, Victorinus. These were the works which Augustine used and the influence of Plotinus is to be noted even in Augustine's manner of expression. For example, the eloquent passage concerning the ecstasy he had at Ostia while speaking with his mother just before her death is practically a transliteration of a similar passage in Plotinus' *Enneads*.

By the translation, then, made by Victorinus, Augustine was able to study the works of Plotinus so intelligently that he found himself in a new world. No destructive unbelief here; no dismal pessi-

<sup>1</sup> De Civ. Dei, VIII, 12.

<sup>2</sup> Walker, *The Philosophy of St. Augustine*.

mism; nothing but bright hope for the future. He felt that in Plotinus he had discovered a kindred spirit. They were not of that breed of philosophers who avoid all contacts with human life, carrying out their experiments with no regard for imaginative thought or actual experience. Augustine, with Plato and Plotinus, realized that "in love there was a power which, if properly used, would be of inestimable value in the pursuit of knowledge. They sought and inquired not only with the brain but also with the heart, and would not rest content until they believed that in God, eternal truth and eternal love, they had arrived at a solution of their philosophical puzzles. Augustine may have carried his idolization of Plato, and especially of Plotinus too far, but the fact remains that Neo-Platonism was the guide-post that directed his steps from chaotic darkness towards the sunlight of truth, and his meeting with the writings of the Platonists he ever regarded as a great favor from God."<sup>3</sup>

Platonism appealed to Augustine because it was a philosophy not of what appears to the senses, but of what is apprehended by thought; not of what is transient and often chaotic, but of what is eternal and ordered. Augustine argues that we both can and do attain truth in human thinking. In the order of being we at least know that we exist; in the logical order we know, if not the nature of a thing, then at least that it has or has not an assignable property; in the ethical order, that the higher is to be preferred to the lower and that good must be sought. Of these truths and of many others, especially in mathematics, we do have certainty. There exist in the ideal order, truths which are immutable and eternal; truths which the human mind does not create but rather discovers; truths known to all minds. This is the basis of Platonism, that ideal truth is absolute, changeless, eternal and its existence is independent of the human mind which must learn to apprehend it. Ideal truth, moreover, is a coherent whole and as an ultimate, is God Himself.

Whence it follows that all other being is derivative and dependent. It is created being and in so far as it is being at all it has God as its cause. Therefore, all created being shares in and resembles, if ever so faintly, that Divine Being which is its cause, but since it shares only partially, it admits of variety, diversity, multiplicity, higher and lower grades. The higher the grade, the more perfect the resemblance. Creatures of a higher grade, then, owe more to their cause than do creatures of a lower grade and the more perfect they become, the greater is their dependence on their first cause. We are beings, finite and dependent, sharing partially in the being of God and

---

<sup>3</sup> Lesaar, *Saint Augustine*.

so resembling Him imperfectly, yet more perfectly than the rest of the created world because we are gifted with intelligence and the power to appreciate and love.

With this doctrine as a basis, Augustine naturally develops a theory of knowledge which stresses divine illumination rather than phenomenal experience as held by St. Thomas. According to Augustine, it was this divine illumination which made our world intelligible since the images and symbols in the physical world are imperfect and inadequate. Any serious difference in the theory of knowledge is sure to affect other doctrines and especially the proofs for the existence of God. This is precisely what happened and as a result St. Thomas disregards the main argument proposed by Augustine for the existence of God: that which from the immutability and coherence of truth infers the existence of one eternal and immutable being.

Augustine disagreed with the Platonists on two major issues. He recognized God as an eternal, purely spiritual being and he regarded evil not as a substance in contradiction to the sanctity of God but as an original defect on the part of man's free will as a result of the Fall.

And so, even in the Platonic doctrines which Augustine had so willingly accepted there is no answer to his problem. To be sure, he had found truth therein but he did not find the application to his own life. Through the teachings of Plotinus he had rid himself of the desire for wealth and worldly fame but there was yet another chain holding him captive. He was still a slave to fleshly concupiscence. That is why Augustine was forced to pronounce Platonism unsatisfactory and to adopt Christianity. "What was lacking was the Incarnation and all that it entailed; the Crucifixion, the Redemption, and the founding of a Church which should be the concrete expression of Divine Providence, the vehicle in which divine truth was conserved, and the instrument through which divine power operated."<sup>4</sup>

Turning to the Scriptures at last, Augustine found that his search was at an end. Here he found not only truth which Platonism taught but also the record of Truth's incarnation in a God made man. Accepting the authority of the Word, his faith carried him surely and swiftly to the source of truth. The last bond had been released—that of his affection for woman—and the rest of his life was to be spent in championing that truth which Monica's prayers and assiduous study had enabled him to find.

"Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,  
I am He Whom thou seekest!  
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me."  
The Hound of Heaven.

---

<sup>4</sup> Walker, *The Philosophy of St. Augustine*.