

# ON CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

SAINT AUGUSTINE

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## BOOK TWO

## I

1. Just as I began, when I was writing about things, by warning that no one should consider them except as they are, without reference to what they signify beyond themselves, now when I am discussing signs I wish it understood that no one should consider them for what they are but rather for their value as signs which signify something else. A sign is a thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses. Thus if we see a track, we think of the animal that made the track; if we see smoke, we know that there is a fire which causes it; if we hear the voice of a living being, we attend to the emotion it expresses; and when a trumpet sounds, a soldier should know whether it is necessary to advance or to retreat, or whether the battle demands some other response.

2. Among signs, some are natural and others are conventional. Those are natural which, without any desire or intention of signifying, make us aware of something beyond themselves, like smoke which signifies fire. It does this without any will to signify, for even when smoke appears alone, observation and memory of experience with things bring a recognition of an underlying fire. The track of a passing animal belongs to this class, and the face of one who is wrathful or sad signifies his emotion even when he does not wish to show that he is wrathful or sad, just as other emotions are signified by the expression even when we do not deliberately set out to show them. But it is not proposed here to discuss signs of this type. Since the class formed a division of my subject, I could not disregard it completely, and this notice of it will suffice.

## II

3. Conventional signs are those which living creatures show to one another for the purpose of conveying, in so far as they

are able, the motion of their spirits or something which they have sensed or understood. Nor is there any other reason for signifying, or for giving signs, except for bringing forth and transferring to another mind the action of the mind in the person who makes the sign. We propose to consider and to discuss this class of signs in so far as men are concerned with it, for even signs given by God and contained in the Holy Scriptures are of this type also, since they were presented to us by the men who wrote them. Animals also have signs which they use among themselves, by means of which they indicate their appetites. For a cock who finds food makes a sign with his voice to the hen so that she runs to him. And the dove calls his mate with a cry or is called by her in turn, and there are many similar examples which may be adduced. Whether these signs, or the expression or cry of a man in pain, express the motion of the spirit without intention of signifying or are truly shown as signs is not in question here and does not pertain to our discussion, and we remove this division of the subject from this work as superfluous.

## III

4. Among the signs by means of which men express their meanings to one another, some pertain to the sense of sight, more to the sense of hearing, and very few to the other senses. For when we nod, we give a sign only to the sight of the person whom we wish by that sign to make a participant in our will. Some signify many things through the motions of their hands, and actors give signs to those who understand with the motions of all their members as if narrating things to their eyes. And banners and military standards visibly indicate the will of the captains. And all of these things are like so many visible words. More signs, as I have said, pertain to the ears, and most of these consist of words. But the trumpet, the flute, and the harp make sounds which are not only pleasing but also significant, although as compared with the number of verbal signs the number of signs of this kind are few. For words have

come to be predominant among men for signifying whatever the mind conceives if they wish to communicate it to anyone. However, Our Lord gave a sign with the odor of the ointment with which His feet were anointed; <sup>1</sup> and the taste of the sacrament of His body and blood signified what He wished; <sup>2</sup> and when the woman was healed by touching the hem of His garment, <sup>3</sup> something was signified. Nevertheless, a multitude of innumerable signs by means of which men express their thoughts is made up of words. And I could express the meaning of all signs of the type here touched upon in words, but I would not be able at all to make the meanings of words clear by these signs.

## IV

5. But because vibrations in the air soon pass away and remain no longer than they sound, signs of words have been constructed by means of letters. Thus words are shown to the eyes, not in themselves but through certain signs which stand for them. These signs could not be common to all peoples because of the sin of human dissension which arises when one people seizes the leadership for itself. A sign of this pride is that tower erected in the heavens where impious men deserved that not only their minds but also their voices should be dissonant. <sup>1</sup>

## V

6. Thus it happened that even the Sacred Scripture, by which so many maladies of the human will are cured, was set forth in one language, but so that it could be spread conveniently through all the world it was scattered far and wide in the various languages of translators that it might be known for the salvation of peoples who desired to find in it nothing more than

<sup>1</sup> John 12. 3-8. For the "odor of the ointment," see 3. 12. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 26. 28; Luke 22. 19-20.

<sup>3</sup> Matt. 9. 20-22.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gen. 11. 1-9.

the thoughts and desires of those who wrote it and through these the will of God, according to which we believe those writers spoke.

## VI

7. But many and varied obscurities and ambiguities deceive those who read casually, understanding one thing instead of another; indeed, in certain places they do not find anything to interpret erroneously, so obscurely are certain sayings covered with a most dense mist. I do not doubt that this situation was provided by God to conquer pride by work and to combat disdain in our minds, to which those things which are easily discovered seem frequently to become worthless. For example, it may be said that there are holy and perfect men with whose lives and customs as an exemplar the Church of Christ is able to destroy all sorts of superstitions in those who come to it and to incorporate them into itself, men of good faith, true servants of God, who, putting aside the burden of the world, come to the holy laver of baptism and, ascending thence, conceive through the Holy Spirit and produce the fruit of a twofold love of God and their neighbor. But why is it, I ask, that if anyone says this he delights his hearers less than if he had said the same thing in expounding that place in the Canticle of Canticles where it is said of the Church, as she is being praised as a beautiful woman, "Thy teeth are as flocks of sheep, that are shorn, which come up from the washing, all with twins, and there is none barren among them" <sup>1</sup>? Does one learn anything else besides that which he learns when he hears the same thought expressed in plain words without this similitude? Nevertheless, in a strange way, I contemplate the saints more pleasantly when I envisage them as the teeth of the Church cutting off men from their errors and transferring them to her body after their hardness has been softened as if by being bitten and chewed. I recognize them

<sup>1</sup> Cant. [Song of Sol.] 4. 2.

most pleasantly as shorn sheep having put aside the burdens of the world like so much fleece, and as ascending from the washing, which is baptism, all to create twins, which are the two precepts of love, and I see no one of them sterile of this holy fruit.

8. But why it seems sweeter to me than if no such similitude were offered in the divine books, since the thing perceived is the same, is difficult to say and is a problem for another discussion. For the present, however, no one doubts that things are perceived more readily through similitudes and that what is sought with difficulty is discovered with more pleasure. Those who do not find what they seek directly stated labor in hunger; those who do not seek because they have what they wish at once frequently become indolent in disdain. In either of these situations indifference is an evil. Thus the Holy Spirit has magnificently and wholesomely modulated the Holy Scriptures so that the more open places present themselves to hunger and the more obscure places may deter a disdainful attitude. Hardly anything may be found in these obscure places which is not found plainly said elsewhere.

## VII

9. Before all it is necessary that we be turned by the fear of God toward a recognition of His will,<sup>1</sup> so that we may know what He commands that we desire and what He commands that we avoid. Of necessity this fear will lead us to thought of our mortality and of our future death and will affix all our proud motions, as if they were fleshly members fastened with nails, to the wood of the cross. Then it is necessary that we become meek through piety so that we do not contradict Divine Scripture, either when it is understood and is seen to attack some of our vices, or when it is not understood and we feel as though we are wiser than it is and better able to give precepts. But we should rather think and believe that which

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ps. 110. 10 [111. 10]; Prov. 1. 7; 9. 10; Eccclus. 1. 16.

is written to be better and more true than anything which we could think of by ourselves, even when it is obscure.

10. After these two steps of fear and piety the third step of knowledge confronts us, which I now propose to treat. In this every student of the Divine Scriptures must exercise himself, having found nothing else in them except, first, that God is to be loved for Himself, and his neighbor for the sake of God; second, that he is to love God with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his mind; and third, that he should love his neighbor as himself, that is, so that all love for our neighbor should, like all love for ourselves, be referred to God. Concerning these two precepts we have written in the previous book, where we discussed things. Then it follows that the student first will discover in the Scriptures that he has been enmeshed in the love of this world, or of temporal things, a love far remote from the kind of love of God and of our neighbor which Scripture itself prescribes. Then, indeed, that fear which arises from the thought of God's judgment, and that piety which can do nothing except believe in and accede to the authority of the sacred books, will force him to lament his own situation. For this knowledge of a good hope thrusts a man not into boasting but into lamentation. This attitude causes him to ask with constant prayers for the consolation of divine assistance lest he fall into despair, and he thus enters the fourth step of fortitude, in which he hungers and thirsts for justice. And by means of this affection of the spirit he will extract himself from all mortal joy in transitory things, and as he turns aside from this joy, he will turn toward the love of eternal things, specifically toward that immutable unity which is the Trinity.

11. When, in so far as he is able, he has seen this Trinity glowing in the distance, and has discovered that because of his weakness he cannot sustain the sight of that light, he purges his mind, which is rising up and protesting in the appetite for inferior things, of its contaminations, so that he comes to the fifth step, the counsel of mercy. Here he eagerly

exercises the love of his neighbor and perfects himself in it; and now, filled with hope and fortified in strength, when he arrives at the love of his enemy he ascends to the sixth step, where he cleanses that eye through which God may be seen, in so far as He can be seen by those who die to the world as much as they are able. For they are able to see only in so far as they are dead to this world; in so far as they live in it, they do not see. And now although the light of the Trinity begins to appear more certainly, and not only more tolerably but also more joyfully, it is still said to appear "through a glass in a dark manner"<sup>2</sup> for "we walk more by faith than by sight"<sup>3</sup> when we make our pilgrimage in this world, although "our community is in heaven."<sup>4</sup> On this step he so cleanses the eye of his heart that he neither prefers his neighbor to the Truth nor compares him with it, nor does he do this with himself because he does not so treat him whom he loves as himself. Therefore this holy one will be of such simple and clean heart that he will not turn away from the Truth either in a desire to please men or for the sake of avoiding any kind of adversities to himself which arise in this life. Such a son ascends to wisdom, which is the seventh and last step, where he enjoys peace and tranquillity. "For the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." From fear to wisdom the way extends through these steps.

#### VIII

12. But let us turn our attention to the third step which I have decided to treat as the Lord may direct my discourse. He will be the most expert investigator of the Holy Scriptures who has first read all of them and has some knowledge of them, at least through reading them if not through understanding them. That is, he should read those that are said to be canonical. For he may read the others more securely when he has been instructed in the truth of the faith so that they

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 13. 12.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor. 5. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Phil. 3. 20.

may not preoccupy a weak mind nor, deceiving it with vain lies and fantasies, prejudice it with something contrary to sane understanding. In the matter of canonical Scriptures he should follow the authority of the greater number of catholic Churches, among which are those which have deserved to have apostolic seats and to receive epistles. He will observe this rule concerning canonical Scriptures, that he will prefer those accepted by all catholic Churches to those which some do not accept; among those which are not accepted by all, he should prefer those which are accepted by the largest number of important Churches to those held by a few minor Churches of less authority. If he discovers that some are maintained by the larger number of Churches, others by the Churches of weightiest authority, although this condition is not likely, he should hold them to be of equal value.

13. The whole canon of the Scriptures on which we say that this consideration of the step of knowledge should depend is contained in the following books: the five books of Moses, that is, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy; one book of Josue, one of Judges, one short book called Ruth which seems rather to pertain to the beginning of Kings; then the four books of Kings and two of Paralipomenon, not in sequence, but as if side by side and running at the same time. These are made up of history and are arranged according to the sequence of time and the order of things; there are others arranged in a different order which neither follow this order nor are connected among themselves, like Job, Tobias, Esther, Judith, two books of Machabees, and two books of Esdras. The last two seem to follow the ordered history after the end of Kings or Paralipomenon. Then there are the Prophets, among which are one book of the Psalms of David, and three books of Solomon: Proverbs, the Canticle of Canticles, and Ecclesiastes. For those two books, one of which is called Wisdom and the other Ecclesiasticus, are said to be Solomon's through a certain similitude, since it is consistently said that they were written by Jesus son of Sirach. Nevertheless, since they have merited being received as authoritative,

they are to be numbered among the prophetic books. The remainder are those books called Prophets in a strict sense, containing twelve single books of Prophets joined together. Since they have never been separated, they are thought of as one. The names of the Prophets are Osee, Joel, Amos, Abdias, Jonas, Micheas, Nahum, Habacuc, Sophonias, Aggeus, Zacharias, and Malachias. Then there are four books of four major Prophets: Isaias, Jeremias, Daniel, Ezechiel. The authority of the Old Testament ends with these forty-four books. The New Testament contains the four evangelical books, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the fourteen epistles of Paul the Apostle, to the Romans, two to the Corinthians, to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, to the Philippians, two to the Thessalonians, to the Colossians, two to Timothy, to Titus, to Philemon, to the Hebrews; two Epistles of Peter, three of John, one of Jude, and one of James; a book of the Acts of the Apostles, and a book of the Apocalypse of John.

## IX

14. In all of these books those fearing God and made meek in piety seek the will of God. And the first rule of this undertaking and labor is, as we have said, to know these books even if they are not understood, at least to read them or to memorize them, or to make them not altogether unfamiliar to us. Then those things which are put openly in them either as precepts for living or as rules for believing are to be studied more diligently and more intelligently, for the more one learns about these things the more capable of understanding he becomes. Among those things which are said openly in Scripture are to be found all those teachings which involve faith, the mores of living, and that hope and charity which we have discussed in the previous book. Then, having become familiar with the language of the Divine Scriptures, we should turn to those obscure things which must be opened up and explained so that we may take examples from those things that are manifest to illuminate those things which are obscure, bring-

ing principles which are certain to bear on our doubts concerning those things which are uncertain. In this undertaking memory is of great value, for if it fails rules will not be of any use.

## X

15. There are two reasons why things written are not understood: they are obscured either by unknown or by ambiguous signs. For signs are either literal or figurative. They are called literal when they are used to designate those things on account of which they were instituted; thus we say *bos* [ox] when we mean an animal of a herd because all men using the Latin language call it by that name just as we do. Figurative signs occur when that thing which we designate by a literal sign is used to signify something else; thus we say "ox" and by that syllable understand the animal which is ordinarily designated by that word, but again by that animal we understand an evangelist, as is signified in the Scripture, according to the interpretation of the Apostle, when it says, "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn."<sup>1</sup>

## XI

16. Against unknown literal signs the sovereign remedy is a knowledge of languages. And Latin-speaking men, whom we have here undertaken to instruct, need two others for a knowledge of the Divine Scriptures, Hebrew and Greek, so that they may turn back to earlier exemplars if the infinite variety of Latin translations gives rise to any doubts. Again, in these books we frequently find untranslated Hebrew words, like *amen*, *alleluia*, *racha*, *hosanna*, and so on, of which some, although they could be translated, have been preserved from antiquity on account of their holier authority, like *amen* and *alleluia*; others, like the other two mentioned above, are said not to be translatable into another language. For there are

<sup>1</sup> Deut. 25. 4. For the apostolic interpretation, see 1 Cor. 9. 9; 1 Tim. 5. 18.

some words in some languages which cannot be translated into other languages. And this is especially true of interjections which signify the motion of the spirit rather than any part of a rational concept. And these two belong to this class: *racha* is said to be an expression of indignation and *hosanna* an expression of delight. But a knowledge of these two languages is not necessary for these few things, which are easy to know and to discover, but, as we have said, it is necessary on account of the variety of translations. We can enumerate those who have translated the Scriptures from Hebrew into Greek, but those who have translated them into Latin are innumerable. In the early times of the faith when anyone found a Greek codex, and he thought that he had some facility in both languages, he attempted to translate it.

## XII

17. This situation would rather help than impede understanding if readers would only avoid negligence. For an inspection of various translations frequently makes obscure passages clear. For example, one translator renders a passage in the prophet Isaiah: "Despise not the family of thy seed"; but another says: "Despise not thy own flesh."<sup>1</sup> Either confirms the other, for one may be explained by means of the other. Thus the "flesh" may be taken literally, so that one may find himself admonished that no one should despise his own body, and the "family of the seed" may be taken figuratively so that it is understood to mean "Christians" born spiritually from the seed of the Word which produced us. But a collation of the translations makes it probable that the meaning is a literal precept that we should not despise those of our own blood, since when we compare "family of the seed" with "flesh," blood relations come especially to mind. Whence, I think, comes the statement of the Apostle, who said, "If, by any means, I may provoke to emulation them who are my flesh,

<sup>1</sup> Isa. 58. 7 (Ancient and Vulgate versions).

and may save some of them,"<sup>2</sup> that is, so that, emulating those who had believed, they also might believe. He calls the Jews his "flesh" because of blood relationship. Again, a text of the prophet Isaiah reads: "If you will not believe, you shall not understand," and in another translation: "If you will not believe, you shall not continue."<sup>3</sup> Which of these is to be followed is uncertain unless the text is read in the original language. But both of them nevertheless contain something of great value for the discerning reader. It is difficult for translators to become so disparate that they do not show a similarity in one area of meaning. Thus, although understanding lies in the sight of the Eternal, faith nourishes as children are nourished with milk in the cradles of temporal things. Now "we walk by faith and not by sight."<sup>4</sup> Unless we walk by faith, we shall not be able to come to that sight which does not fail but continues through a cleansed understanding uniting us with Truth. On account of this principle one said, "If you will not believe, you shall not continue," and the other said, "If you will not believe, you shall not understand."

18. Many translators are deceived by ambiguity in the original language which they do not understand, so that they transfer the meaning to something completely alien to the writer's intention. Thus some codices have "their feet are sharp to shed blood," for the word *oxis* in Greek means both "sharp" and "swift." But he sees the meaning who translates "their feet swift to shed blood";<sup>5</sup> the other, drawn in another direction by an ambiguous sign, erred. And such translations are not obscure; they are false, and when this is the situation the codices are to be emended rather than interpreted. The same situation arises when some, because *móschos* in Greek means "calf," do not know that *moschēmata* means "transplantings," and have translated it "calves." This error appears in so many texts that one hardly finds anything else written,

<sup>2</sup> Rom. 11. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Isa. 7. 9 (Ancient and Vulgate versions).

<sup>4</sup> 2 Cor. 5. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Rom. 3. 15 (from Prov. 1. 16).

although the sense is very clear and is supported by the succeeding words. For the expression "bastard slips shall not take deep root"<sup>6</sup> makes better sense than to speak of "calves," which walk on the earth and do not take root in it. The rest of the context, moreover, supports this translation.

## XIII

19. Since the meaning which many interpreters, according to their ability and judgment, seek to convey is not apparent unless we consult the language being translated, and since many translators err from the sense of the original authors unless they are very learned, we must either seek a knowledge of those languages from which Scripture is translated into Latin or we must consult the translations of those who translate word for word, not because they suffice but because by means of them we may test the truth or falsity of those who have sought to translate meanings as well as words. For often not only single words but whole locutions are translated because they cannot be expressed in Latin if one wishes to adhere to the ancient and customary idiom of the Latin language. These unidiomatic expressions do not impede the understanding, but they offend those who take more delight in things when the signs for them are governed by a certain correctness. For what is called a solecism is nothing else than an arrangement of words which does not conform to the law followed by those who have spoken before us with some authority. Whether one says "among men" by saying *inter homines* or by saying *inter hominibus* does not affect the person considering things rather than signs. In the same way, what else is a barbarism except a word pronounced with letters or sounds different from those which those who spoke Latin before us were accustomed to use? Whether *ignoscere* [to forgive] is spoken with a long or short third syllable makes little difference to a man asking God to forgive his sins, in whatever way he can pronounce the word. What then is in-

<sup>6</sup> Wisd. 4. 3.

tegrity of expression except the preservation of the customs of others, confirmed by the authority of ancient speakers?

20. The more men are offended by these things, the weaker they are. And they are weaker in that they wish to seem learned, not in the knowledge of things, by which we are truly instructed, but in the knowledge of signs, in which it is very difficult not to be proud. For even the knowledge of things frequently raises the neck unless it is disciplined by the yoke of the Lord. It does not impede the understanding of the reader to find written: "What is the land in which these dwell upon it, whether it is good or evil, and what are the cities in which these dwell in them?"<sup>1</sup> I consider this to be the idiom of an alien tongue rather than the expression of a more profound meaning. There is also the expression that we cannot now take away from the chant of the people: "but upon him shall my sanctification flourish."<sup>2</sup> Nothing is detracted from the meaning, although the more learned hearer may wish to correct it so that *florabit* is spoken instead of *foriet*, and nothing impedes the correction but the custom of the chanters. These things may easily be disregarded if one does not wish to pay attention to that which does not detract from a sound understanding. Then there is the expression of the Apostle: "The foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men."<sup>3</sup> If anyone wished to keep the Greek idiom and say "The foolishness of God is wiser of men, and the weakness of God is stronger of men," the labor of the vigilant reader would lead him to the true meaning, but a somewhat slower reader might either not understand it or misunderstand it. For not only is such a phrase incorrect in the Latin language, it also obscures the truth in ambiguity. Thus the foolishness of men or the weakness of men might seem wiser or stronger than God's. And even *sapientius est hominibus* [wiser than men] does not lack ambiguity, although it contains no solecism. Without the illumination of the idea

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Num. 13. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Ps. 131. 18 [132. 18], with *foriet* instead of *efflorabit* as in the Vulgate.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 1. 25.



being conveyed it is not clear whether *hominibus* is ablative or dative. It would be better to say *sapientius est quam homines* and *fortius est quam homines*, which express the ideas "wiser than men" and "stronger than men" without any possible ambiguity.

## XIV

21. We shall speak later of ambiguous signs; now we are discussing unknown signs, of which there are two forms, in so far as they apply to words. For either an unknown word or an unknown expression may impede the reader. If these come from foreign languages we must consult one who speaks those languages, or learn them ourselves if we have leisure and ability, or make a comparison of various translations. If we do not know certain words or expressions in our own language, we become familiar with them by reading and hearing them. Nothing is better commended to the memory than those types of words and expressions which we do not know, so that when one more learned appears who may be questioned, or when a passage appears in reading where the preceding or following context makes their meaning clear, we may easily with the aid of the memory refer to them and learn them. Such is the force of habit even in learning that those who are nourished and educated in the Holy Scriptures wonder more at other expressions and think them poorer Latin than those used in the Scriptures, even though these do not appear in the writings of the Latin authors. In this matter of learning a comparison and weighing of various translations is also useful. But falsity should be rejected. For those who desire to know the Sacred Scriptures should exercise their ingenuity principally that texts not emended should give way to those emended, at least among those which come from one source of translation.

## XV

22. Among these translations the *Itala* is to be preferred, for it adheres to the words and is at the same time perspicua-

cious regarding meaning.<sup>1</sup> And in emending Latin translations, Greek translations are to be consulted, of which the Septuagint carries most authority in so far as the Old Testament is concerned. In all the more learned churches it is now said that this translation was so inspired by the Holy Spirit that many men spoke as if with the mouth of one. It is said and attested by many of not unworthy faith that, although the translators were separated in various cells while they worked, nothing was to be found in any version that was not found in the same words and with the same order of words in all of the others. Who would compare any other authority with this, or, much less, prefer another? But even if they conferred and arrived at a single opinion on the basis of common judgment and consent, it is not right or proper for any man, no matter how learned, to seek to emend the consensus of so many older and more learned men. Therefore, even though something is found in Hebrew versions different from what they have set down, I think we should cede to the divine dispensation by which they worked to the end that the books which the Jewish nation refused to transmit to other peoples, either out of envy or for religious reasons, might be revealed so early, by the authority and power of King Ptolemy, to the nations which in the future were to believe in Our Lord. It may be that the Holy Spirit judged that they should translate in a manner befitting the people whom they addressed and that they should speak as if with one voice. Yet, as I have said before, a comparison with those translators who adhered most closely to the words of the original is not without use in explaining their meaning. Latin translations of the Old Testament, as I set out to say, are to be emended on the authority of the Greeks, and especially on the authority of those who, although there were seventy, are said to have spoken as if with one voice. Moreover, if the books of the New Testament are confusing in the variety of their Latin translations, they

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of St. Augustine's preferences among Scriptural texts, see Maurice Pontet, *L'exégèse de Saint Augustin prédicateur* (Paris, 1946), pp. 220 ff.

should certainly give place to the Greek versions, especially to those which are found among more learned and diligent Churches.

## XVI

23. Among figurative signs, if any impede the reader, he should study them partly with reference to a knowledge of languages and partly with reference to a knowledge of things. Thus the pool of Siloe, where the Lord commanded the man whose eyes he had anointed with clay made of spittle to wash, has some value as a similitude and undoubtedly suggests some mystery [e.g., baptism], but the name Siloe in an unknown language, if it had not been interpreted for us by the Evangelist,<sup>1</sup> would have concealed a very important perception. In the same way many Hebrew names which are not explained by the authors of those books undoubtedly have considerable importance in clarifying the enigmas of the Scriptures, if someone were able to interpret them. Some men, expert in that language, have rendered no small benefit to posterity by having explained all of those words taken from the Scriptures without reference to place and have translated Adam, Eve, Abraham, Moses, and names of places like Jerusalem, Sion, Jericho, Sinai, Lebanon, Jordan, or whatever other names in that language are unknown to us; and since these things have been made known, many figurative expressions in the Scriptures have become clear.

24. An ignorance of things makes figurative expressions obscure when we are ignorant of the natures of animals, or stones, or plants, or other things which are often used in the Scriptures for purposes of constructing similitudes. Thus the well-known fact that a serpent exposes its whole body in order to protect its head from those attacking it illustrates the sense of the Lord's admonition that we be wise like serpents.<sup>2</sup> That is, for the sake of our head, which is Christ, we should offer our bodies to persecutors lest the Christian faith be in a

<sup>1</sup> John 9. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 10. 16.

manner killed in us, and in an effort to save our bodies we deny God. It is also said that the serpent, having forced its way through narrow openings, sheds its skin and renews its vigor. How well this conforms to our imitation of the wisdom of the serpent when we shed the "old man," as the Apostle says, and put on the "new";<sup>3</sup> and we shed it in narrow places, for the Lord directs us, "Enter ye in at the narrow gate."<sup>4</sup> Just as a knowledge of the nature of serpents illuminates the many similitudes which Scripture frequently makes with that animal, an ignorance of many other animals which are also used for comparisons is a great impediment to understanding. The same thing is true of stones, or of herbs or of other things that take root. For a knowledge of the carbuncle which shines in the darkness also illuminates many obscure places in books where it is used for similitudes, and an ignorance of beryl or of diamonds frequently closes the doors of understanding. In the same way it is not easy to grasp that the twig of olive which the dove brought when it returned to the ark<sup>5</sup> signifies perpetual peace unless we know that the soft surface of oil is not readily corrupted by an alien liquid and that the olive tree is perennially in leaf. Moreover, there are many who because of an ignorance of hyssop—being unaware of its power either to purify the lungs or, as it is said, to penetrate its roots to the rocks in spite of the fact that it is a small and humble plant—are not able at all to understand why it is said, "Thou shalt sprinkle me with hyssop, and I shall be cleansed."<sup>6</sup>

25. An ignorance of numbers also causes many things expressed figuratively and mystically in the Scriptures to be misunderstood. Certainly, a gifted and frank person cannot avoid wondering about the significance of the fact that Moses, Elias, and the Lord Himself all fasted for forty days.<sup>7</sup> The knot, as it were, of this figurative action cannot be untied without a knowledge and consideration of this number. For it contains

<sup>3</sup> Eph. 4. 22-25; Col. 3. 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> Matt. 7. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Gen. 8. 11.  
<sup>6</sup> Ps. 50. 9 [51. 7].

<sup>7</sup> Exod. 24. 18; 3 Kings [1 Kings] 19. 8; Matt. 4. 2.

four tens, to indicate the knowledge of all things involved in times. The day and the year both run their courses in a quaternion: the day in hours of morning, noon, evening, and night; the year in the months of spring, summer, autumn, and winter. But while we live in these times we should abstain and fast from temporal delight because of the eternity in which we wish to live, for in the very courses of time the doctrine in accordance with which we condemn temporal things and desire the eternal is suggested. Again, the number ten signifies a knowledge of the Creator and the creature; for the trinity is the Creator and the septenary indicates the creature by reason of his life and body. For with reference to life there are three, whence we should love God with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all our minds; and with reference to the body there are very obviously four elements of which it is made. Thus when the number ten is suggested to us with reference to time, or, that is, when it is multiplied by four, we are admonished to live chastely and continually without temporal delight, or, that is, to fast for forty days. This the Law, represented in the person of Moses; the Prophets, whose person is acted by Elias; and the Lord Himself all admonish. He, as if bearing the testimony of the Law and the Prophets, appeared between these two on the Mount to His three watching and amazed disciples.<sup>8</sup> Then it may be asked how the number fifty, which is very sacred in our religion because of the feast of Pentecost, proceeds from forty; or how, when it is tripled because of the three times—before the Law, during the Law, and under Grace—or because of the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and the number of the most high Trinity is added, it refers to the mystery of the most pure Church and arrives at the number of the hundred and fifty-three fish which the net caught “on the right side” after the Resurrection of the Lord.<sup>9</sup> In the same way many other numbers and patterns of numbers are placed by way of similitudes in the sacred books as secrets which are often closed to readers because of ignorance of numbers.

<sup>8</sup> Matt. 17. 3.

<sup>9</sup> John 21. 6-11.

26. An ignorance of some things concerning music also halts and impedes the reader. A certain writer has well explained some figures of things on the basis of the difference between the psaltery and the harp. It may be inquired not unreasonably among the learned whether the psalterium of ten strings follows any musical law which demands strings of that number, or, if no such law exists, whether that number should be considered more sacred either on account of the Ten Commandments (if a question is raised about that number, we can apply it to the Creator and the creature), or whether it is used because of the explanation of the number ten we have used above. And the number mentioned in the Gospel in connection with the building of the temple, forty-six years,<sup>10</sup> somehow has a musical sound, and, when it is applied to the structure of Our Lord's body, it causes some heretics to confess the Son of God to be clothed not falsely but with a true and human body.<sup>11</sup> And we find both number and music given an honorable position in many places in the Sacred Scriptures.

#### XVII

27. We must not listen to the superstition of the pagans who professed that the nine Muses are the daughters of Jove and Memory. They were refuted by Varro, than whom among the pagans I know of no one more eager and learned in such matters. He says that a certain city, the name of which I have forgotten, contracted with three sculptors for triple statues of the Muses to be placed as an offering in the temple of Apollo with the stipulation that only the group of the artist who wrought most beautifully would be purchased. It so happened that the work of the sculptors was of equal beauty and that the city was pleased with all nine figures so that all were bought and dedicated in the temple. He says that later the poet Hesiod named all nine of them. Thus Jupiter did not

<sup>10</sup> John 2. 20.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. 2. 28. 42. The number 46 was taken as a sign of Christ's human body, since A D A M may be thought of as 1 plus 4 plus 1 plus 40.

beget the nine Muses, but three artists made triple statues. Moreover, that city did not hit on the number three because someone had seen three Muses in a dream, or because so many had appeared to anyone's eyes, but because it is easy to see that all sound which furnishes material for songs is of a threefold nature. It is either produced by the voice, like the sound made by those who sing from the throat without instrumental accompaniment, by the breath, like the sound made by trumpets and flutes, or by striking, like the sound produced by harps, drums, or other percussion instruments.

## XVIII

28. But whether Varro's account is to be accepted or not, we should not avoid music because of the superstition of the profane if we can find anything in it useful for understanding the Holy Scriptures, although we should not turn to their theatrical frivolities to discover whether anything valuable for spiritual purposes is to be gathered from their harps and other instruments. But we should not think that we ought not to learn literature because Mercury is said to be its inventor, nor that because the pagans dedicated temples to Justice and Virtue and adored in stones what should be performed in the heart, we should therefore avoid justice and virtue. Rather, every good and true Christian should understand that wherever he may find truth, it is his Lord's. And confessing and acknowledging this truth also in the sacred writings, he will repudiate superstitious imaginings and will deplore and guard against men who "when they knew God . . . have not glorified him as God, or given thanks; but became vain in their thoughts, and their foolish heart was darkened. For professing themselves to be wise, they became fools. And they changed the glory of the incorruptible God into the likeness of the image of a corruptible man, and of birds, and of four-footed beasts, and of creeping things."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rom. 1. 21-23.

## XIX

29. But in order that we may explain this whole matter, which is very important, more thoroughly, I should add that there are two kinds of doctrine which are of force in the mores of the pagans. One of these concerns things which men have themselves instituted; the other concerns those things which they have seen to be firmly established or divinely ordained. That which concerns the institutions of men is partly superstitious and partly not superstitious.

## XX

30. Among superstitious things is whatever has been instituted by men concerning the making and worshipping of idols, or concerning the worshipping of any creature or any part of any creature as though it were God. Of the same type are things instituted concerning consultations and pacts involving prognostications with demons who have been placated or contracted with. These are the endeavors of the magic arts, which the poets are accustomed to mention rather than to teach. To the same class belong, although they show a more presumptuous vanity, the books of haruspicy and augury. Here also belong those amulets and remedies which medical science also condemns, whether these involve enchantments, or certain secret signs called "characters," or the hanging, tying, or in any way wearing of certain things, not for the purpose of healing the body, but because of certain significations, either occult or manifest. These are given the mild name of "physics" so that they may seem not to be involved with superstitions but to be helpful to nature. Of this type are the rings hung in the top of each ear, or the little rings of ostrich bones on the fingers, or the practice of telling a person with hiccupps to hold his left thumb in his right hand.

31. To these may be added a thousand vacuous observances to follow if a limb trembles or if a stone, dog, or child comes between friends walking arm in arm. The custom of kicking a stone, as if it were a destroyer of friendship, is less obnoxious

than that of hitting an innocent child with the fist if he runs between two people walking together. And it is fitting that sometimes children are avenged by dogs; for some persons are so superstitious that they even dare to hit a dog that has come between them, and not without paying for it. For sometimes the dog quickly sends him who strikes him from a vain remedy to a true physician. Other similar practices are the following: to step on the threshold when you leave your house by the front door, to go back to bed if anyone sneezes while you are putting on your shoes, to return to the house if you stumble going out, or, when your clothes are torn by mice, to dread more the omen of a future evil than the actual damage. Whence that elegant saying of Cato, who, when consulted by a man whose shoes had been gnawed by mice, observed that there was nothing strange about the fact, but that it would have been strange indeed if the shoes had gnawed the mice.

### XXI

32. Nor are those to be excluded from this sort of pernicious superstition who are called *genethiaci* because they are concerned with birthdays, or, commonly, *mathematici* [judicial astrologers]. Although these men may seek out and even find the exact position of the stars at the time someone is born, yet when they seek to predict on that basis either our actions or the outcome of our actions they err greatly and sell unlearned men into a miserable servitude. For a man who is free when he goes to such an astrologer gives his money that he may leave him as the servant either of Mars or of Venus, or rather of all the stars to which those who first erred in this way and passed their error on to posterity gave names of beasts because of resemblances, or names of men in an effort to honor those men. That they did so was not strange, for even in more modern and recent times the Romans wished to give to the star we call Lucifer the honor and the name of Caesar. Perhaps they might have succeeded and established a tradition if his ancestor Venus had not already occupied the estate of that

name; nor could she according to any law pass on to her descendants what she had never possessed nor sought to possess in life. But where a place was vacant and not held in honor of someone who had died earlier, the usual practice in such matters was adhered to. Thus we call the quintile and sextile months July and August, so named in honor of Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar, and anyone who wishes may understand that in the same way the stars once moved in the sky without the names we now give them. When certain men died whose memory was honored either because of the power of kings or the pleasure of human vanity, their names were given to the stars and they themselves were thought to be thus raised to the heavens after death. But whatever they may be called by men, the stars are those which God created and arranged as He wished, and their motion, in accordance with which times vary and are distinguished, is certain.<sup>1</sup> It is easy to notice this motion, however it may be, at the time a person is born according to the rules discovered and written down by those whom Scripture condemns, saying; "For if they were able to know so much as to make a judgment of the world, how did they not more easily find out the Lord thereof?"<sup>2</sup>

### XXII

33. To desire to predict at birth, on the basis of such observations, the habits, actions, and fortunes of men is a great error and a great madness. Among those who know something about this vain knowledge, the superstition may be altogether refuted. For they observe the configurations of the stars which they call constellations at the time of birth of the one concerning whom these wretched men are consulted by those even more wretched. But it may happen that twins emerge from the uterus in such rapid succession that no one can observe the interval of time between them and note it in the numbers of the constellations. Whence it follows that some twins have the same constellation. But they do not have the same fortunes

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gen. 1. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Wisd. 13. 9.

with respect to what they do or what they suffer. Instead, they are frequently different, so that while one lives very happily, the other lives very unhappily. Thus we know that Esau and Jacob were born twins in such a way that Jacob, who was born last, was found holding with his hand the foot of his brother who went before.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the day and hour of birth for these two could not be otherwise noted except in such a way that the constellation for both should be the same. Yet what a difference there was in the manners, deeds, labors, and fortunes of these two men the Scripture, now accessible to all men, testifies.

34. Nor is it pertinent to say that the least moment and the smallest portion of time which separates the births of twins is of great importance in nature and in the very rapid course of the heavenly bodies. Even when it is conceded that it matters a great deal, it cannot be discovered by the astrologer in the constellations by which he professes to foretell destinies. Therefore he does not find any difference in constellations since he must observe the same ones whether he is consulted concerning Jacob or concerning his brother. It is of no help to him if there is a difference of time in the heavens which he rashly and negligently blames when there is no difference in the chart which he fruitlessly and solicitously examines. Thus those beliefs in certain signs of things instituted by human presumption are to be classed with those which result from certain pacts and contracts with demons.

### XXIII

35. For it is brought about as if by a certain secret judgment of God that men who desire evil things are subjected to illusion and deception as a reward for their desires, being mocked and deceived by those lying angels to whom, according to the most beautiful ordering of things, the lowest part of this world is subject by the law of Divine Providence. By these illusions and deceptions it happens that many things concern-

ing the past and future determined by these superstitious and pernicious methods of divination actually happen as they are so determined; many things happen for the diviners in accordance with their divinations, so that, enmeshed in them, they are made more curious and entangle themselves more and more in the multiple snares of a most pernicious error. This kind of fornication of the spirit is happily not passed over in silence by the Holy Scripture, nor has it frightened the soul away in such a way that it avoids these things because falsehoods are spoken by those who profess them; but rather, "if they speak to you," it says, "and it comes to pass, do not believe them."<sup>1</sup> If the image of the dead Samuel predicted truths to King Saul,<sup>2</sup> those sacrifices by which that image was called up are no less to be condemned. Again, in the Acts of the Apostles, although the woman with the Pythonical spirit gave true testimony of the apostles of the Lord, the Apostle Paul nevertheless did not spare that spirit but cleansed the woman by denouncing and driving out the demon.<sup>3</sup>

36. Therefore all arts pertaining to this kind of trifling or noxious superstition constituted on the basis of a pestiferous association of men and demons as if through a pact of faithless and deceitful friendship should be completely repudiated and avoided by the Christian, "not that the idol is anything," as the Apostle says, but because "the things which the heathens sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God. And I would not that you should be made partakers with devils."<sup>4</sup> For what the Apostle says concerning idols and the sacrifices that are made in their honor should be understood concerning all imaginary signs which lead to the cult of idols or to the worship of a creature or its parts as God, or pertain to the concern for remedies and other observations which are not as it were publicly and divinely constituted for the love of God and of our neighbor but rather debauch the hearts of the wretched through their love for temporal things. With reference to all teachings of this kind, therefore, the society of demons is to

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Deut. 13. 1-3.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 16. 16-18.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Kings [1 Sam.] 28. 15-19.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor. 10. 19-20.

<sup>1</sup> Gen. 25. 26.

be feared and avoided, since they seek to do nothing under their leader the Devil but to block and cut off our return homeward. Just as human and deceptive conjectures have been established by men concerning the stars which God created and ordered, many similar speculations have been made concerning things that are born or things having their being through the administration of Divine Providence and have been set down as if according to rule to account for unusual occurrences like the foaling of a mule or the striking of lightning.

## XXIV

37. All such omens are valid only in so far as through previously established imaginings, as if these were a common language, they are agreed upon with demons. Moreover, they all imply a pestiferous curiosity, an excruciating solicitude, and a mortal slavery. They were not noticed because of any innate validity, but they were made to have a validity through being noticed and pointed out. And thus they seem different to different people in accordance with their thoughts and pre-  
sumptions. Those spirits who wish to deceive procure for each one those effects as they discern them by means of which he may be ensnared by his own suspicions and customary habits of thought. To use an analogy, one figure of a letter X set down in the form of a cross mark means one thing among the Latins, another among the Greeks, not because of its nature, but because of agreement and consent to its significance. And thus he who knows both languages does not use that sign with the same signification when he wishes to convey something in writing to a Greek that he implies when he writes to a man who speaks Latin. And the single sign *beta* means a letter among the Greeks but a vegetable among the Latins. When I say *lege*, a Greek understands one thing by these two syllables, a Latin understands another. Therefore just as all of these significations move men's minds in accordance with the consent of their societies, and because this consent varies, they move them differently, nor do men agree upon them because

of an innate value, but they have a value because they are agreed upon, in the same way those signs which form the basis for a pernicious alliance with demons are of value only in accordance with the observations of the individual. This fact is very obvious in the rites of the augurs who arrange not to see birds nor to hear their cries before or after their observations because what they see or hear is significant only if the observer consents to consider it so.

## XXV

38. When these things have been cut off and eradicated from the Christian mind, then those practices are to be examined which are not superstitious, that is, which are not based upon agreements with demons but upon agreements among men themselves. For all practices which have value among men because men agree among themselves that they are valuable are human institutions; and of these some are superfluous and extravagant, others useful and necessary. Thus if those signs which the actors make in their dances had a natural meaning and not a meaning dependent on the institution and consent of men, the public crier in early times would not have had to explain to the Carthaginian populace what the dancer wished to convey during the pantomime. Many old men still remember the custom, as we have heard them say. And they are to be believed, for even now if anyone unacquainted with such trifles goes to the theater and no one else explains to him what these motions signify, he watches the performance in vain. It is true that everyone seeks a certain verisimilitude in making signs so that these signs, in so far as is possible, may resemble the things that they signify. But since one thing may resemble another in a great variety of ways, signs are not valid among men except by common consent.

39. Where pictures or statues are concerned, or other similar imitative works, especially when executed by skilled artists, no one errs when he sees the likeness, so that he recognizes what things are represented. And all things of this class are to be



counted among the superfluous institutions of men except when it is important to know concerning one of them why, where, when, and by whose authority it was made. Then there are thousands of imagined fables and falsehoods by whose lies men are delighted, which are human institutions. And nothing is more typical of men among those things which they have from themselves than what is deceitful and lying. But the useful and necessary institutions established by men with men include whatever they have agreed upon concerning differences of dress and the adornment of the person useful for distinguishing sex or rank, and innumerable kinds of signs without which human society could not or could not easily function, including weights and measures, differences of value and impression in coinage appropriate to specific states and peoples, and other things of this kind. If these had not been purely human institutions they would not vary among different peoples nor in single nations according to the will of their leaders.

40. But all this part of human institutions helpful to the necessary conduct of life is not to be shunned by the Christian; rather, as such institutions are needed, they are to be given sufficient notice and remembered.

### XXVI

Human institutions are imperfect reflections of natural institutions or are similar to them. Those which pertain to association with demons, as we have said, should be completely repudiated and disdained; those which men have established among themselves are to be adopted in so far as they are not extravagant and superfluous, and especially the forms of letters without which we cannot read, and a sufficient variety of languages, which we have discussed above. Of the same class are the characters of the type used by those who are now called shorthand writers. These are useful; they neither are learned in an illicit way, nor do they enmesh anyone in superstition,

nor enervate through extravagance, if they occupy us only so far that they do not interfere with more important things to which we should devote our attention.

### XXVII

41. At the same time we must not consider as human institutions those things which men did not establish but which have been fruitful subjects of investigation as they appear either in the course of time or by divine institution. Of these, some pertain to the corporal senses, others to reason. Those which pertain to the corporal senses we either believe when they are explained to us, experience when they are demonstrated to us, or infer when we have experienced them.

### XXVIII

42. Thus whatever evidence we have of past times in that which is called history helps us a great deal in the understanding of the sacred books, even if we learn it outside of the Church as a part of our childhood education. For we are required to know many things in accordance with the Olympiads and the names of the consuls; and an ignorance of the consulship at the time Our Lord was born and of that at the time of His Passion has caused some to err in such a way that they thought the Lord suffered His Passion at the age of forty-six, since the Jews said that so many years were required for the building of the temple, which is a figure for the body of Our Lord.<sup>1</sup> Now we know that He was baptized, on the authority of the Gospel,<sup>2</sup> at about the age of thirty, and it is possible to estimate on the basis of His actions as they are described in this text how much longer He lived. Nevertheless, lest any shadow of doubt should arise from any other source, it can be determined more clearly and certainly on the basis of a com-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. John 2. 20-21.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 3. 23.



parison of pagan history with that of the gospel. Then it will be seen that it was not vainly said that the temple was built in forty-six years, for since the number could not refer to the age of Our Lord, it may refer to a more secret instruction concerning the human body, which the only Son of God, through whom all things are made, did not disdain to put on for our benefit.

43. With reference to the usefulness of history, if I may omit the Greeks, what a question our Ambrose solved after the calumnies of the readers and admirers of Plato, who dared to say that all the lessons of Our Lord Jesus Christ, which they were forced to admire and to teach, were learned from the writings of Plato, since it cannot be denied that Plato lived long before the advent of the Lord! Did not the famous bishop, when he had considered the history of the pagans and found that Plato had traveled in Egypt during the time of Jeremias, show that Plato had probably been introduced to our literature by Jeremias so that he was able to teach or to write doctrines that are justly commended? Pythagoras himself did not live before the literature of the Hebrew nation, in which the cult of one God took its origin and from which Our Lord came "according to the flesh,"<sup>3</sup> was written. And from the disciples of Pythagoras these men claim that Plato learned theology. Thus from a consideration of times it becomes more credible that the Platonists took from our literature whatever they said that is good and truthful than that Our Lord Jesus Christ learned from them. To believe the latter view is the utmost madness.

44. Although human institutions of the past are described in historical narration, history itself is not to be classed as a human institution; for those things which are past and cannot be revoked belong to the order of time, whose creator and administrator is God. It is one thing to describe what has been done, another to describe what should be done. History narrates what has been done faithfully and usefully; but books of

<sup>3</sup> Rom. 9. 5.

haruspicy and all similar books seek to show what should be done or observed with the audacity of the author, not with the faith of a guide.

## XXIX

45. There is also a type of narrative resembling description which points out to the ignorant facts about the present rather than about the past. To this class belong things that have been written about the location of places, or the nature of animals, trees, plants, stones, or other objects. We have spoken of these writings above where we taught that they are valuable for the solution of enigmas in the Scriptures, not that they should be considered as signs for superstitious remedies or machinations. For we distinguish that type from the legitimate and open type to be discussed here. For it is one thing to say, "If you drink the juice of this herb, your stomach will not hurt," and quite another to say, "If you hang this herb around your neck, your stomach will not hurt." The first course is recommended as a healthful remedy; the second is to be condemned as a superstitious sign. Even though there are no incantations, invocations, or "characters" involved, the question often remains as to whether the thing which is to be tied or in any way attached to heal the body is valid because of the force of nature, in which case it is to be used freely, or is valid because of some signifying convention, in which case the Christian should avoid it the more cautiously the more it seems to be efficacious in doing good. For where the cause for the efficacy of a thing is hidden, the intention for which it is used is to be considered in so far as it concerns the healing or tempering of bodies either in medicine or in agriculture.

46. The stars, of which Scripture mentions only a very few, are known through description rather than narration. Although the course of the moon, which is relevant to the celebration of the anniversary of the Passion of Our Lord, is known to many, there are only a few who know well the rising or setting or other movements of the rest of the stars without

error. Knowledge of this kind in itself, although it is not allied with any superstition, is of very little use in the treatment of the Divine Scriptures and even impedes it through fruitless study; and since it is associated with the most pernicious error of vain prediction it is more appropriate and virtuous to condemn it. It contains beyond a description of present circumstances an element akin to historical narration, since on the basis of the present position and motion of the stars it is possible to trace their past courses according to rule. It also includes predictions concerning the future made according to rule which are not superstitious and portentous but certain and fixed by calculation. We do not seek to learn from these any application to our deeds and fates in the manner of the ravings of the astrologers but only information that pertains to the stars themselves. For just as he who computes the phases of the moon, when he has observed its condition today, can determine its condition at a given period of years in the past or in the future, so in the same way those who are competent can make assertions about any of the other stars. I have stated my opinion about knowledge of this kind in so far as its usefulness is concerned.

## XXX

47. Among other arts some are concerned with the manufacture of a product which is the result of the labor of the artificer, like a house, a bench, a dish, or something else of this kind. Others exhibit a kind of assistance to the work of God, like medicine, agriculture, and navigation. Still others have all their effect in their proper actions, like dancing, running, and wrestling. In all of these arts experience with the past makes possible inferences concerning the future, for no artificer in any of them performs operations except in so far as he bases his expectations of the future on past experience. A knowledge of these arts is to be acquired casually and superficially in the ordinary course of life unless a particular office demands a more profound knowledge, a possibility with which we are not here concerned. We do not need to know

how to perform these arts but only how to judge them in such a way that we are not ignorant of what the Scripture implies when it employs figurative locutions based on them.<sup>1</sup>

## XXXI

48. There remain those institutions which do not pertain to the corporal senses but to the reason, where the sciences of disputation and number hold sway. The science of disputation is of great value for understanding and solving all sorts of questions that appear in sacred literature. However, in this connection the love of controversy is to be avoided, as well as a certain puerile ostentation in deceiving an adversary. There are, moreover, many false conclusions of the reasoning process called sophisms, and frequently they so imitate true conclusions that they mislead not only those who are slow but also the ingenious when they do not pay close attention. For example, a man holding a discussion with another submits the proposition: "What I am, you are not." The other, because it is true in part, or because the speaker is deceitful and he is simple, agrees. Then the first adds, "I am a man." When this too is agreed upon, he concludes, saying, "Therefore you are not a man." As I see it, the Scripture condemns this kind of captious conclusion in that place where it is said, "He that speaketh sophistically is hateful."<sup>2</sup> At times a discourse which is not captious, but which is more abundant than is consistent with gravity, being inflated with verbal ornament, is also called sophistical.

49. There are also valid processes of reasoning having false conclusions which follow from the error of the disputant. An error of this kind may be led to its conclusions by a good and learned man so that the disputant, being ashamed of them, relinquishes his error. For if he maintains it, he will also be forced to maintain conclusions which he himself condemns.

<sup>1</sup> It should be emphasized that throughout this discussion St. Augustine is concerned primarily with the education of the Christian exegete.

<sup>2</sup> Ecclus. 37. 23.

For example, the Apostle did not infer the truth when he said "then Christ is not risen," or when he said "then is our preaching vain, and your faith also vain."<sup>3</sup> He added other things altogether false, since Christ has risen and the preaching of those who announced this fact was not vain, nor was the faith of those who believed it. But these false conclusions most truly follow from the premise of those who said that "there is no resurrection of the dead."<sup>4</sup> When these false conclusions, which would be true if the dead did not arise, are repudiated, the resurrection of the dead follows as a consequent. Since correct inferences may be made concerning false as well as true propositions, it is easy to learn the nature of valid inference even in schools which are outside of the Church. But the truth of propositions is a matter to be discovered in the sacred books of the Church.

## XXXII

50. However, the truth of valid inference was not instituted by men; rather it was observed by men and set down that they might learn or teach it. For it is perpetually instituted by God in the reasonable order of things. Thus the person who narates the order of events in time does not compose that order himself; and he who shows the location of places or the natures of animals, plants, or minerals does not discuss things instituted by men; and he who describes the stars or their motions does not describe anything instituted by himself or by other men. In the same way, he who says, "When a consequent is false, it is necessary that the antecedent upon which it is based be false also," speaks very truly; but he does not arrange matters so that they are this way. Rather, he simply points out an existing truth. This rule is the basis for what we have quoted from the Apostle Paul. Those whose error the Apostle wished to refute had set forth the antecedent that there is no resurrection of the dead. But the consequent follows from this antecedent that there is no resurrection of the dead that "then

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 15. 13, 14.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor. 15. 12.

Christ is not risen," but this consequent is false. For Christ arose, so that the antecedent is false that there is no resurrection of the dead. It follows that there is a resurrection of the dead. This may be put briefly as follows: "If there is no resurrection of the dead, neither was Christ resurrected. But Christ was resurrected. Therefore there is a resurrection of the dead." The principle that if the consequent is false the antecedent must also be false was not instituted by men, but discovered. And this rule applies to the validity of inferences, not to the truth of propositions.

## XXXIII

51. When the argument about resurrection is presented in this way, both the rules of inference and the meaning of the conclusion are true. Valid inferences may be made from false premises in this way. Suppose someone to have conceded, "If a snail is an animal, it has a voice." When this has been conceded and it has been shown that a snail has no voice, the antecedent is invalidated since the consequent appears that a snail is not an animal. This consequent is false, but the inference from the false antecedent is correct. Thus the truth of a proposition is inherent in itself, but the truth of a consequent depends on the opinion or agreement of the disputant. Thus, as we said above, a false premise should be led to its valid inferences so that he whose error we wish to correct will abandon it when he sees that the consequences to which it leads are to be rejected. Now it is easy to understand that just as valid consequents may be derived from false antecedents, so also true antecedents may be led to false consequents. Suppose someone should say, "If he is just, he is good," and that this proposition is granted. Then let him add, "But he is not just," and let this also be accepted. He may conclude, "He is therefore not good." Although all of these things may be true, the conclusion is not valid according to rule. For the invalidation of the antecedent does not necessarily invalidate the consequent in the way that the invalidation of the consequent also invalidates the antecedent. Although it is true when we say,

"If he is an orator, he is a man," it does not follow that we may infer "He is not a man" if we add to the first antecedent the assertion, "He is not an orator."

## XXXIV

52. In this way it is one thing to know the rules of valid inference, another thing to know the truth of propositions. Concerning inferences, one learns what is consequent, what is inconsequent, and what is incompatible. It is logical that "If one is an orator, he is a man"; it is illogical that "If one is a man, he is an orator"; and the parts of "If one is a man, he is a quadruped" are incompatible. In these instances, the inferences themselves are judged. Concerning the truth of propositions, however, the rules of inference are not relevant and the propositions are to be considered in themselves. But when true and certain propositions are joined by valid inferences to propositions we are not sure about, the latter, also, necessarily become certain. There are those who boast when they have learned the rules of valid inference as if they had learned the truth of propositions. And on the other hand, there are some who know many true propositions but think ill of themselves because they do not know the rules of inference. But he who knows that there is a resurrection of the dead is better than another who knows that it follows from the proposition that there is no resurrection of the dead that "then Christ is not risen."

## XXXV

53. In the same way the science of definition, division, and partition, although it may be applied to falsehoods, is neither false in itself nor instituted by men; rather it was discovered in the order of things. Although poets have used it in their fables, and false philosophers in the expression of their erroneous opinions, and even heretics or false Christians have been accustomed to use it, there is nevertheless nothing false

in the fact that in definition, division, and partition anything is to be used which is pertinent to the subject and nothing is to be used which is not pertinent. This is true even though that which is defined or distributed into its various parts is not true. For falsehood itself may be defined, when we say that a signification attributed to a thing is false when the thing itself does not justify that signification, or define the false in some other way. And this definition is true even though the false may not be true. We may also divide this subject, saying that there are two kinds of falsehood, one of which involves things that are not possible, and the other of which involves things that are possible but nevertheless do not exist. For he who says that seven and three are eleven says something that cannot be at all; but he who says that it rained, let us say, on January 1, even though it did not rain on that day, describes something that might be true. Thus the definition and division of the false may be very true, but the false itself cannot be true in any way.

## XXXVI

54. There are, moreover, certain precepts for a more copious discourse which make up what are called the rules of eloquence, and these are very true, even though they may be used to make falsehoods persuasive. Since they can be used in connection with true principles as well as with false, they are not themselves culpable, but the perversity of ill using them is culpable. Men did not themselves institute the fact that an expression of charity conciliates an audience, or the fact that it is easy to understand a brief and open account of events, or that the variety of a discourse keeps the auditors attentive and without fatigue. There are other similar principles which may be employed either in false or in true causes, but which are themselves true in so far as they cause things to be known or to be believed, or move men's minds either to seek or to avoid something. And these are rather discovered than instituted.

## XXXVII

55. But when these precepts are learned they are to be applied more in expressing those things which are understood than in the pursuit of understanding. However, a knowledge of inference, definition, and division aids the understanding a great deal, provided that men do not make the mistake of thinking that they have learned the truth of the blessed life when they have learned them. Moreover, it frequently happens that men more easily learn the things themselves on account of which these principles are learned than the very knotty and spiny precepts of these disciplines. It is as if one should wish to give rules for walking and admonishes that the rear foot is not to be raised until the first foot is put down, and then goes on to describe in detail how the hinges of the joints and knees are to be moved. He speaks truly, nor is it possible to walk in any other way. Yet men more easily do these things when they walk than pay attention to them while they are doing them or understand them when they are described. But those who cannot walk care about the rules much less, since they cannot try them by experience. In the same way an ingenious person more easily discerns a false conclusion than he learns the rules governing it. And a stupid person who does not discern it is much less apt to understand the rules. And in all of these things the semblances of truth more frequently delight us than prove themselves helpful to us in disputing or judging. They may make men's discernment more alert, but they may also make men malign and proud so that they love to deceive with specious arguments and questions or to think themselves great because they have learned these things and therefore place themselves above good and innocent people.

## XXXVIII

56. It is perfectly clear to the most stupid person that the science of numbers was not instituted by men, but rather investigated and discovered. Virgil did not wish to have the first

syllable of *Italia* short, as the ancients pronounced it, and it was made long.<sup>1</sup> But no one could in this fashion because of his personal desire arrange matters so that three threes are not nine, or do not geometrically produce a square figure, or are not the triple of the ternary, or are not one and a half times six, or are evenly divisible by two when odd numbers cannot be so divided. Whether they are considered in themselves or applied to the laws of figures, or of sound, or of some other motion, numbers have immutable rules not instituted by men but discovered through the sagacity of the more ingenious.

57. But whoever delights in these things in such a way that he boasts among the unlearned, and does not seek to learn the source of the truths which he has somehow perceived and to know whence those things are not only true but immutable which he has seen to be immutable, and thus, arising from corporal appearances to the human mind, when he finds this to be mutable since it is now learned and now unlearned, does not come to understand that it is placed between immutable things above it and other mutable things below it, and so does not turn all his knowledge toward the praise and love of one God from whom he knows that everything is derived—this man may seem to be learned. But he is in no way wise.

## XXXIX

58. Thus it seems to me that studious and intelligent youths who fear God and seek the blessed life might be helpfully admonished that they should not pursue those studies which are taught outside of the Church of Christ as though they might lead to the blessed life. Rather they should soberly and diligently weigh them. And if they find some which are instituted by men which vary because of the diverse wills of those who founded them and because of the base notions of those in error, and especially if they imply a society with demons through certain significations made as if through pacts or agreements, these are to be repudiated and detested. They

<sup>1</sup> Virg. *Aen.* 1. 2, *et passim.*

should also avoid superfluous and extravagant institutions of men. But they should not neglect those human institutions helpful to social intercourse in the necessary pursuits of life. Among other teachings to be found among the pagans, aside from the history of things both past and present, teachings which concern the corporal senses, including the experience and theory of the useful mechanical arts, and the sciences of disputation and of numbers, I consider nothing to be useful. And in all of these, the maxim is to be observed, "Nothing in excess." And this is especially true with reference to those arts pertaining to the corporal senses, since they are limited by times and places.

59. Just as certain scholars have interpreted separately all the Hebrew, Syrian, Egyptian, and other foreign names and words that appear in the Holy Scriptures without interpretation, and just as Eusebius has written a history because of questions in the divine books which demand its use, so that it is not necessary for Christians to engage in much labor for a few things, in the same way I think it might be possible, if any capable person could be persuaded to undertake the task for the sake of his brethren, to collect in order and write down singly explanations of whatever unfamiliar geographical locations, animals, herbs and trees, stones, and metals are mentioned in the Scripture. The same thing could be done with numbers so that the rationale only of those numbers which are mentioned in the Holy Scripture is explained. I have discovered that some of this material, or, indeed, almost all of it, contrary to my expectation, has already been explained and written down by good and learned Christians, but either because of common negligence or envious disregard it remains hidden. Whether the same sort of thing could be done with the science of disputation I do not know, but I suspect that it would not be possible because that knowledge is interwoven throughout the text of Scripture like so many nerves. Moreover, it is of more use to the reader in solving and explaining ambiguities, which we shall discuss later, than in clarifying unknown signs, which we are discussing now.

### XI

60. If those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, have said things which are indeed true and are well accommodated to our faith, they should not be feared; rather, what they have said should be taken from them as from unjust possessors and converted to our use.<sup>1</sup> Just as the Egyptians had not only idols and grave burdens which the people of Israel detested and avoided, so also they had vases and ornaments of gold and silver and clothing which the Israelites took with them secretly when they fled, as if to put them to a better use. They did not do this on their own authority but at God's commandment, while the Egyptians unwittingly supplied them with things which they themselves did not use well.<sup>2</sup> In the same way all the teachings of the pagans contain not only simulated and superstitious imaginings and grave burdens of unnecessary labor, which each one of us leaving the society of pagans under the leadership of Christ ought to abominate and avoid, but also liberal disciplines more suited to the uses of truth, and some most useful precepts concerning morals. Even some truths concerning the worship of one God are discovered among them. These are, as it were, their gold and silver, which they did not institute themselves but dug up from certain mines of divine Providence, which is everywhere infused, and perversely and injuriously abused in the worship of demons. When the Christian separates himself in spirit from their miserable society, he should take this treasure with him for the just use of teaching the gospel. And their clothing, which is made up of those human institutions which are accommodated to human society and necessary to the conduct of life, should be seized and held to be converted to Christian uses.

61. For what else have many of our good faithful done? May we not see with how much gold and silver and clothing bundled up the most sweet teacher and most blessed martyr

<sup>1</sup> For Augustine's influence on the preservation of the Platonic tradition, see R. Kibbansky, *The Continuity of the Platonic Tradition during the Middle Ages* (London, 1939).

<sup>2</sup> Exod. 3: 22; 11: 2; 12: 35.

Cyprian fled from Egypt? Or how much Lactantius took with him? Or how much Victorinus, Optatus, Hilary carried with them, not to speak of those still living? Or how much innumerable Greeks have taken? This was done first by that most faithful servant of God, Moses, of whom it is written that he "was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians."<sup>3</sup> The superstitious custom of the pagans would never have accommodated all of these men with disciplines which they might find useful, especially in those times when through objections to the yoke of Christ the pagans were persecuting Christians, if it had been suspected that the knowledge would prove useful in the worship of one God, through which the vain cult of idols is abolished. But they gave their gold, silver, and clothing to the people of God fleeing from Egypt not knowing that they yielded those things which they gave "unto the obedience of Christ."<sup>4</sup> That which was done in Exodus was undoubtedly a figure that it might typify these things. I say this without prejudice to any other equal or better understanding.

## XLI

62. When the student of Holy Scripture, having been instructed in this way, begins to approach his text, he should always bear in mind the apostolic saying, "Knowledge puffs up; but charity edifies."<sup>1</sup> Thus he will feel that, although he has fled rich from Egypt, he cannot be saved unless he has observed the Pasch. "For Christ our pasch is sacrificed,"<sup>2</sup> and the sacrifice of Christ emphasizes for us nothing more than that which He said as if to those whom He saw laboring under Pharaoh: "Come to me, all you that labour, and are burdened, and I will refresh you. Take up my yoke upon you, and learn of me, because I am meek, and humble of heart: and you shall find rest to your souls. For my yoke is sweet and my burden light."<sup>3</sup> To whom is it thus light except to those of meek and humble heart whom knowledge does not inflate but

<sup>3</sup> Acts 7. 22.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Cor. 10. 5.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 8. 1.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 5. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Matt. 11. 28-30.

charity edifies? Students should remember, therefore, concerning those who once celebrated the Pasch with appearances of shadows, that when they were commanded to mark the doors with the blood of the lamb, they were to be marked with hyssop.<sup>4</sup> This is a meek and humble herb, and yet nothing is stronger or more penetrating than its roots. Thus "rooted and founded in charity," we "may be able to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth, and length, and height, and depth,"<sup>5</sup> which things make up the Cross of Our Lord. Its breadth is said to be in the transverse beam upon which the hands are stretched; its length extends from the ground to the crossbar, and on it the whole body from the hands down is affixed; its height reaches from the crossbar to the top where the head is placed; and its depth is that part which is hidden beneath the earth. In the Sign of the Cross the whole action of the Christian is described: to perform good deeds in Christ, to cling to Him with perseverance, to hope for celestial things, to refrain from profaning the sacraments. Having been cleansed by this action, we shall be able "to know" also the charity of Christ, which surpasseth all knowledge," through which He is equal with the Father, by whom all things are made, so that we "may be filled unto all the fullness of God."<sup>6</sup> There is also in hyssop a cleansing power, lest, inflated by the knowledge of wealth taken from the Egyptians, the swollen lung should breathe forth in pride: "Thou shalt sprinkle me with hyssop, and I shall be cleansed: thou shalt wash me, and I shall be made whiter than snow. To my hearing thou shalt give joy and gladness." And then the Psalmist adds as a consequence that he may show hyssop to signify a cleansing from pride, "and the bones that have been humbled shall rejoice."<sup>7</sup>

## XLII

63. To the extent that the wealth of gold and silver and clothing which that people took with them from Egypt was less

<sup>4</sup> Exod. 12. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Eph. 3. 17-18.

<sup>6</sup> Eph. 3. 19.

<sup>7</sup> Ps. 50. 9-10 [51. 7-8].



than that they afterwards acquired at Jerusalem, especially during the reign of King Solomon,<sup>1</sup> the knowledge collected from the books of the pagans, although some of it is useful, is also little as compared with that derived from the Holy Scriptures. For whatever a man has learned elsewhere is censured there if it is harmful; if it is useful, it is found there. And although anyone may find everything which he has usefully learned elsewhere there, he will also find very abundantly things which are found nowhere else at all except as they are taught with the wonderful nobility and remarkable humility of the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, when the reader has been prepared by this instruction so that he is not impeded by unknown signs, with a meek and humble heart, subjected easily to Christ with a burden that is light, established, rooted, and built up in charity so that knowledge cannot puff him up, let him turn next to the examination and consideration of ambiguous signs in the Scriptures, concerning which I shall essay to set forth in the third book what the Lord has granted to me.

## BOOK THREE

### I

1. A man fearing God diligently seeks His will in the Holy Scriptures. And lest he should love controversy, he is made gentle in piety. He is prepared with a knowledge of languages lest he be impeded by unknown words and locutions. He is also prepared with an acquaintance with certain necessary things lest he be unaware of their force and nature when they are used for purposes of similitudes. He is assisted by the accuracy of texts which expert diligence in emendation has procured. Thus instructed, he may turn his attention to the investigation and solution of the ambiguities of the Scriptures. That he may not be deceived by ambiguous signs we shall

<sup>1</sup> 3 Kings [1 Kings] 10. 14-17.

offer some instruction. It may be, however, that he will deride those ways which we wish to point out as puerile either because of the greatness of his acumen or the brilliance of his illumination. Nevertheless, as I set out to say, he who has a mind to be instructed by us, in so far as he may be instructed by us, will know that the ambiguity of Scripture arises either from words used literally or figuratively, both of which types we have discussed in the second book.

### II

2. When words used literally cause ambiguity in Scripture, we must first determine whether we have misspunctuated or misconstrued [with reference to Latin, "mispronounced"]<sup>1</sup> them. When investigation reveals an uncertainty as to how a locution should be pointed or construed, the rule of faith should be consulted as it is found in the more open places of the Scriptures and in the authority of the Church. We explained this sufficiently when we spoke of things in the first book. But if both meanings, or all of them, in the event that there are several, remain ambiguous after the faith has been consulted, then it is necessary to examine the context of the preceding and following parts surrounding the ambiguous place, so that we may determine which of the meanings among those which suggest themselves it would allow to be consistent.

3. Now, consider some examples. This heretical punctuation does not allow that the Word is God: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was," so that the sense of what follows is different: "This Word was in the beginning with God." But this is to be refuted according to the rule of faith which teaches us the equality of the Trinity, so that we say: "And the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God."<sup>2</sup>

4. Neither aspect of the ambiguity is contrary to the faith, so that the context must be used as a guide where the Apostle

<sup>1</sup> On "pronunciation" here translated in other terms, see H. I. Marron, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* (Paris, 1938), p. 21.

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