

# Saint Augustine, Letter 137 (A.D. 412)

To My Most Excellent Son, the Noble and Justly Distinguished Lord Volusianus, Augustine Sends Greeting in the Lord.

## Chapter 1

1. I have read your letter, containing an abstract of a notable conversation given with praiseworthy conciseness. I feel bound to reply to it, and to forbear from alleging any excuse for delay; for it happens opportunely that I have a short time of leisure from occupation with the affairs of other persons. I have also put off in the meantime dictating to my amanuensis certain things to which I had purposed to devote this leisure, for I think it would be a grievous injustice to delay answering questions which I had myself exhorted the questioner to propound. For which of us who are administering, as we are able, the grace of Christ would wish to see you instructed in Christian doctrine only so far as might suffice to secure to yourself salvation— not salvation in this present life, which, as the word of God is careful to remind us, is but a vapor appearing for a little while and then vanishing away, but that salvation in order to the obtaining and eternal possession of which we are Christians? It seems to us too little that you should receive only so much instruction as suffices to your own deliverance. For your gifted mind, and your singularly able and lucid power of speaking, ought to be of service to all others around you, against whom, whether slowness or perversity be the cause, it is necessary to defend in a competent way the dispensation of such abounding grace, which small minds in their arrogance despise, boasting that they can do very great things, while in fact they can do nothing to cure or even to curb their own vices.

2. You ask: "Whether the Lord and Ruler of the world did indeed fill the womb of a virgin? Did His mother endure the protracted fatigues of ten months, and, being yet a virgin, in due season bring forth her child, and continue even after that with her virginity intact? Was He whom the universe is supposed to be scarcely able to contain concealed within the small body of a crying infant? Did He bear the years of childhood, and grow up and become established in the rigour of manhood? Was this Governor so long an exile from His own dwelling-place, and was the care of the whole world transferred to a body of such insignificant dimensions? Did He sleep, did He take food as nourishment, and was He subject to all the sensations of mortal men?" You go on to say that "the proofs of His great majesty do not shine forth with any adequate fullness of evidence; for the casting out of devils, the curing of the sick, and the restoration of the dead are, if we consider others who have performed these wonders, but small works for God to do." This question, you say, was introduced in a certain meeting of friends by one of the company, but that the rest of you prevented him from bringing forward any further questions, and, breaking up the meeting, deferred the consideration of the matter till you should have the benefit of experience beyond your own, lest, by too rashly intruding into hidden things, the error, innocent thus far, should become blame-worthy.

3. Thereupon you appeal to me, and request me to observe what is desired from me after this confession of your ignorance. You add, that my reputation is concerned in your obtaining an answer to these questions, because, though ignorance is tolerated without injury to religion in other priests, when

an inquiry is addressed to me, who am a bishop, whatever is not known to me must be no part of the Christian system.

I begin, therefore, by requesting you to lay aside the opinion which you have too easily formed concerning me, and dismiss those sentiments, though they are gratifying evidences of your goodwill, and believe my testimony rather than any other's regarding myself, if you reciprocate my affection. For such is the depth of the Christian Scriptures, that even if I were attempting to study them and nothing else from early boyhood to decrepit old age, with the utmost leisure, the most unwearied zeal, and talents greater than I have, I would be still daily making progress in discovering their treasures; not that there is so great difficulty in coming through them to know the things necessary to salvation, but when any one has accepted these truths with the faith that is indispensable as the foundation of a life of piety and uprightness, so many things which are veiled under manifold shadows of mystery remain to be inquired into by those who are advancing in the study, and so great is the depth of wisdom not only in the words in which these have been expressed, but also in the things themselves, that the experience of the oldest, the ablest, and the most zealous students of Scripture illustrates what Scripture itself has said: "When a man has done, then he begins." Sirach 18:6

## Chapter 2

4. But why say more as to this? I must rather address myself to the question which you propose. In the first place, I wish you to understand that the Christian doctrine does not hold that the Godhead was so blended with the human nature in which He was born of the virgin that He either relinquished or lost the administration of the universe, or transferred it to that body as a small and limited material substance. Such an opinion is held only by men who are incapable of conceiving of anything but material substances — whether more dense, like water and earth, or more subtle, like air and light; but all alike distinguished by this condition, that none of them can be in its entirety everywhere, because, by reason of its many parts, it cannot but have one part here, another there, and however great or small the body may be, it must occupy some place, and so fill it that in its entirety it is in no one part of the space occupied. And hence it is the distinctive property of material bodies that they can be condensed and rarefied, contracted and dilated, crushed into small fragments and enlarged to great masses. The nature of the soul is very far different from that of the body; and how much more different must be the nature of God, who is the Creator of both soul and body! God is not said to fill the world in the same way as water, air, and even light occupy space, so that with a greater or smaller part of Himself He occupies a greater or smaller part of the world. He is able to be everywhere present in the entirety of His being: He cannot be confined in any place: He can come without leaving the place where He was: He can depart without forsaking the place to which He had come.

5. The mind of man wonders at this, and because it cannot comprehend it, refuses, perhaps, to believe it. Let it, however, not go on to wonder incredulously at the attributes of the Deity without first wondering in like manner at the mysteries within itself; let it, if possible, raise itself for a little above the body, and above those things which it is accustomed to perceive by the bodily organs, and let it contemplate what that is which uses the body as its instrument. Perhaps it cannot do this, for it requires, as one has said, great power of mind to call the mind aside from the senses, and to lead thought away from its wonted track. Let the mind, then, examine the bodily senses in this somewhat unusual manner, and with the utmost attention. There are five distinct bodily senses, which cannot exist

either without the body or without the soul; because perception by the senses is possible, on the one hand, only while a man lives, and the body receives life from the soul; and on the other hand, only by the instrumentality of the body vessels and organs, through which we exercise sight, hearing, and the three other senses. Let the reasoning soul concentrate attention upon this subject, and consider the senses of the body not by these senses themselves, but by its own intelligence and reason. A man cannot, of course, perceive by these senses unless he lives; but up to the time when soul and body are separated by death, he lives in the body. How, then, does his soul, which lives nowhere else than in his body, perceive things which are beyond the surface of that body? Are not the stars in heaven very remote from his body? And yet does he not see the sun yonder? And is not seeing an exercise of the bodily senses — nay, is it not the noblest of them all? What, then? Does he live in heaven as well as in his body, because he perceives by one of his senses what is in heaven, and perception by sense cannot be in a place where there is no life of the person perceiving? Or does he perceive even where he is not living — because while he lives only in his own body, his perceptive sense is active also in those places which, outside of his body and remote from it, contain the objects with which he is in contact by sight? Do you see how great a mystery there is even in a sense so open to our observation as that which we call sight? Consider hearing also, and say whether the soul diffuses itself in some way abroad beyond the body. For how do we say, "Some one knocks at the door," unless we exercise the sense of hearing at the place where the knock is sounding? In this case also, therefore, we live beyond the limits of our bodies. Or can we perceive by sense in a place in which we are not living? But we know that sense cannot be in exercise where life is not.

6. The other three senses are exercised through immediate contact with their own organs. Perhaps this may be reasonably disputed in regard to the sense of smell; but there is no controversy as to the senses of taste and touch, that we perceive nowhere else than by contact with our bodily organism the things which we taste and touch. Let these three senses, therefore, be set aside from present consideration. The senses of sight and hearing present to us a wonderful question, requiring us to explain either how the soul can perceive by these senses in a place where it does not live, or how it can live in a place where it is not. For it is not anywhere but in its own body, and yet it perceives by these senses in places beyond that body. For in whatever place the soul sees anything, in that place it is exercising the faculty of perception, because seeing is an act of perception; and in whatever place the soul hears anything, in that place it is exercising the faculty of perception, because hearing is an act of perception. Wherefore the soul is either living in that place where it sees or hears, and consequently is itself in that place, or it exercises perception in a place where it is not living, or it is living in a place and yet at the same moment is not there. All these things are astonishing; not one of them can be stated without seeming absurdity; and we are speaking only of senses which are mortal. What, then, is the soul itself which is beyond the bodily senses, that is to say, which resides in the understanding whereby it considers these mysteries? For it is not by means of the senses that it forms a judgment concerning the senses themselves. And do we suppose that something incredible is told us regarding the omnipotence of God, when it is affirmed that the Word of God, by whom all things were made, did so assume a body from the Virgin, and manifest Himself with mortal senses, as neither to destroy His own immortality, nor to change His eternity, nor to diminish His power, nor to relinquish the government of the world, nor to withdraw from the bosom of the Father, that is, from the secret place where He is with Him and in Him?

7. Understand the nature of the Word of God, by whom all things were made, to be such that you cannot think of any part of the Word as passing, and, from being future, becoming past. He remains as

He is, and He is everywhere in His entirety. He comes when He is manifested, and departs when He is concealed. But whether concealed or manifested, He is present with us as light is present to the eyes both of the seeing and of the blind; but it is felt to be present by the man who sees, and absent by him who is blind. In like manner, the sound of the voice is near alike to the hearing and to the deaf, but it makes its presence known to the former and is hidden from the latter. But what is more wonderful than what happens in connection with the sound of our voices and our words, a thing, for-truth, which passes away in a moment? For when we speak, there is no place for even the next syllable till after the preceding one has ceased to sound; nevertheless, if one hearer be present, he hears the whole of what we say, and if two hearers be present, both hear the same, and to each of them it is the whole; and if a multitude listen in silence, they do not break up the sounds like loaves of bread, to be distributed among them individually, but all that is uttered is imparted to all and to each in its entirety. Consider this, and say if it is not more incredible that the abiding word of God should not accomplish in the universe what the passing word of man accomplishes in the ears of listeners, namely, that as the word of man is present in its entirety to each and all of the hearers, so the Word of God should be present in the entirety of His being at the same moment everywhere.

8. There is, therefore, no reason to fear in regard to the small body of the Lord in His infancy, lest in it the Godhead should seem to have been straitened. For it is not in vast size but in power that God is great: He has in His providence given to ants and to bees senses superior to those given to asses and camels; He forms the huge proportions of the fig-tree from one of the minutest seeds, although many smaller plants spring from much larger seeds; He also has furnished the small pupil of the eye with the power which, by one glance, sweeps over almost the half of heaven in a moment; He diffuses the whole fivefold system of the nerves over the body from one centre and point in the brain; He dispenses vital motion throughout the whole body from the heart, a member comparatively small; and by these and other similar things, He, who in small things is great, mysteriously produces that which is great from things which are exceedingly little. Such is the greatness of His power that He is conscious of no difficulty in that which is difficult. It was this same power which originated, not from without, but from within, the conception of a child in the Virgin's womb: this same power associated with Himself a human soul, and through it also a human body — in short, the whole human nature to be elevated by its union with Him — without His being thereby lowered in any degree; justly assuming from it the name of humanity, while amply giving to it the name of Godhead. The body of the infant Jesus was brought forth from the womb of His mother, still a virgin, by the same power which afterwards introduced His body when He was a man through the closed door into the upper chamber. John 20:26 Here, if the reason of the event is sought out, it will no longer be a miracle; if an example of a precisely similar event is demanded, it will no longer be unique. Let us grant that God can do something which we must admit to be beyond our comprehension. In such wonders the whole explanation of the work is the power of Him by whom it is wrought.

### Chapter 3

9. The fact that He took rest in sleep, and was nourished by food, and experienced all the feelings of humanity, is the evidence to men of the reality of that human nature which He assumed but did not destroy. Behold, this was the fact; and yet some heretics, by a perverted admiration and praise of His power, have refused altogether to acknowledge the reality of His human nature, in which is the guarantee of all that grace by which He saves those who believe in Him, containing deep treasures of

wisdom and knowledge, and imparting faith to the minds which He raises to the eternal contemplation of unchangeable truth. What if the Almighty had created the human nature of Christ not by causing Him to be born of a mother, but by some other way, and had presented Him suddenly to the eyes of mankind? What if the Lord had not passed through the stages of progress from infancy to manhood, and had taken neither food nor sleep? Would not this have confirmed the erroneous impression above referred to, and have made it impossible to believe at all that He had taken to Himself true human nature; and, while leaving what was marvellous, would eliminate the element of mercy from His actions? But now He has so appeared as the Mediator between God and men, that, uniting the two natures in one person, He both exalted what was ordinary by what was extraordinary, and tempered what was extraordinary by what was ordinary in Himself.

10. But where in all the varied movements of creation is there any work of God which is not wonderful, were it not that through familiarity these wonders have become small in our esteem? Nay, how many common things are trodden under foot, which, if examined carefully, awaken our astonishment! Take, for example, the properties of seeds: who can either comprehend or declare the variety of species, the vitality, vigour, and secret power by which they from within small compass evolve great things? Now the human body and soul which He took to Himself was created without seed by Him who in the natural world created originally seeds from no pre-existent seeds. In the body which thus became His, he who, without any liability to change in Himself, has woven according to His counsel the vicissitudes of all past centuries, became subject to the succession of seasons and the ordinary stages of the life of man. For His body, as it began to exist at a point of time, became developed with the lapse of time. But the Word of God, who was in the beginning, and to whom the ages of time owe their existence, did not bow to time as bringing round the event of His incarnation apart from His consent, but chose the point of time at which He freely took our nature to Himself. The human nature was brought into union with the divine; God did not withdraw from Himself.

11. Some resist upon being furnished with an explanation of the manner in which the Godhead was so united with a human soul and body as to constitute the one person of Christ, when it was necessary that this should be done once in the world's history, with as much boldness as if they were themselves able to furnish an explanation of the manner in which the soul is so united to the body as to constitute the one person of man, an event which is occurring every day. For just as the soul is united to the body in one person so as to constitute man, in the same way God united to man in one person so as to constitute Christ. In the former personality there is a combination of soul and body; in the latter there is a combination of the Godhead and man. Let my reader, however, guard against borrowing his idea of the combination from the properties of material bodies, by which two fluids when combined are so mixed that neither preserves its original character; although even among material bodies there are exceptions, such as light, which sustains no change when combined with the atmosphere. In the person of man, therefore, there is a combination of soul and body; in the person of Christ there is a combination of the Godhead with man; for when the Word of God was united to a soul having a body, He took into union with Himself both the soul and the body. The former event takes place daily in the beginning of life in individuals of the human race; the latter took place once for the salvation of men. And yet of the two events, the combination of two immaterial substances ought to be more easily believed than a combination in which the one is immaterial and the other material. For if the soul is not mistaken in regard to its own nature, it understands itself to be immaterial. Much more certainly does this attribute belong to the Word of God; and consequently the combination of the Word with the

human soul is a combination which ought to be much more credible than that of soul and body. The latter is realized by us in ourselves; the former we are commanded to believe to have been realized in Christ. But if both of them were alike foreign to our experience, and we were enjoined to believe that both had taken place, which of the two would we more readily believe to have occurred? Would we not admit that two immaterial substances could be more easily combined than one immaterial and one material; unless, perhaps, it be unsuitable to use the word combination in connection with these things, because of the difference between their nature and that of material substances, both in themselves and as known to us?

12. Wherefore the Word of God, who is also the Son of God, co-eternal with the Father, the Power and the Wisdom of God, 1 Corinthians 1:24 mightily pervading and harmoniously ordering all things, from the highest limit of the intelligent to the lowest limit of the material creation, Wisdom 8:1 revealed and concealed, nowhere confined, nowhere divided, nowhere distended, but without dimensions, everywhere present in His entirety — this Word of God, I say, took to Himself, in a manner entirely different from that in which He is present to other creatures, the soul and body of a man, and made, by the union of Himself therewith, the one person Jesus Christ, Mediator between God and men, 1 Timothy 2:5 in His Deity equal with the Father, in His flesh, i.e. in His human nature, inferior to the Father — unchangeably immortal in respect of the divine nature, in which He is equal with the Father, and yet changeable and mortal in respect of the infirmity which was His through participation with our nature.

In this Christ there came to men, at the time which He knew to be most fitting, and which He had fixed before the world began, the instruction and the help necessary to the obtaining of eternal salvation. Instruction came by Him, because those truths which had been, for men's advantage, spoken before that time on earth not only by the holy prophets, all whose words were true, but also by philosophers and even poets and authors in every department of literature (for beyond question they mixed much truth with what was false), might by the actual presentation of His authority in human nature be confirmed as true for the sake of those who could not perceive and distinguish them in the light of essential Truth, which Truth was, even before He assumed human nature, present to all who were capable of receiving truth. Moreover, by the fact of His incarnation, He taught this above all other things for our benefit — that whereas men longing after the Divine Being supposed, from pride rather than piety, that they must approach Him not directly, but through heavenly powers which they regarded as gods, and through various forbidden rites which were holy but profane — in which worship devils succeed, through the bond which pride forms between mankind and them in taking the place of holy angels — now men might understand that the God whom they were regarding as far removed, and whom they approached not directly but through mediating powers, is actually so very near to the pious longings of men after Him, that He has condescended to take a human soul and body into such union with Himself that this complete man is joined to Him in the same way as the body is joined to the soul in man, excepting that whereas both body and soul have a common progressive development, He does not participate in this growth, because it implies mutability, a property which God cannot assume. Again, in this Christ the help necessary to salvation was brought to men, for without the grace of that faith which is from Him, no one can either subdue vicious desires, or be cleansed by pardon from the guilt of any power of sinful desire which he may not have wholly vanquished. As to the effects produced by His instruction, is there now even an imbecile, however weak, or a silly woman, however low, that does not believe in the immortality of the soul and the reality of a life after death? Yet these are truths which, when Pherecydes the Assyrian for the first time maintained them in discussion among the Greeks of old,

moved Pythagoras of Samos so deeply by their novelty, as to make him turn from the exercises of the athlete to the studies of the philosopher. But now what Virgil said we all behold: "The balsam of Assyria grows everywhere." And as to the help given through the grace of Christ, in Him truly are the words of the same poet fulfilled: "With You as our leader, the obliteration of all the traces of our sin which remain shall deliver the earth from perpetual alarm."

## Chapter 4

13. "But," they say, "the proofs of so great majesty did not shine forth with adequate fullness of evidence; for the casting out of devils, the healing of the sick, and the restoration of the dead to life are but small works for God to do, if the others who have wrought similar wonders be borne in mind." We ourselves admit that the prophets wrought some miracles like those performed by Christ. For among these miracles what is more wonderful than the raising of the dead? Yet both Elijah and Elisha did this. 1 Kings 17:22; 2 Kings 4:35 As to the miracles of magicians, and the question whether they also raised the dead, let those pronounce an opinion who strive, not as accusers, but as panegyrists, to prove Apuleius guilty of those charges of practising magical arts from which he himself takes abundant pains to defend his reputation. We read that the magicians of Egypt, the most skilled in these arts, were vanquished by Moses, the servant of God, when they were working wonderfully by impious enchantments, and he, by simply calling upon God in prayer, overthrew all their machinations. But this Moses himself and all the other true prophets prophesied concerning the Lord Christ, and gave to Him great glory; they predicted that He would come not as One merely equal or superior to them in the same power of working miracles, but as One who was truly God the Lord of all, and who became man for the benefit of men. He was pleased to do also some miracles, such as they had done, to prevent the incongruity of His not doing in person such things as He had done by them. Nevertheless, He was to do also some things peculiar to Himself, namely, to be born of a virgin, to rise from the dead, to ascend to heaven. I know not what greater things he can look for who thinks these too little for God to do.

14. For I think that such signs of divine power are demanded by these objectors as were not suitable for Him to do when wearing the nature of men. The Word was in the beginning, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and by Him all things were made. John 1:1 Now, when the Word became flesh, was it necessary for Him to create another world, that we might believe Him to be the person by whom the world was made? But within this world it would have been impossible to make another greater than itself, or equal to it. If, however, He were to make a world inferior to that which now exists, this, too, would be considered too small a work to prove His deity. Wherefore, since it was not necessary that He should make a new world, He made new things in the world. For that a man should be born of a virgin, and raised from the dead to eternal life, and exalted above the heavens, is perchance a work involving a greater exertion of power than the creating of a world. Here, probably, objectors may answer that they do not believe that these things took place. What, then, can be done for men who despise smaller evidences as inadequate, and reject greater evidences as incredible? That life has been restored to the dead is believed, because it has been accomplished by others, and is too small a work to prove him who performs it to be God: that a true body was created in a virgin, and being raised from death to eternal life, was taken up to heaven, is not believed, because no one else has done this, and it is what God alone could do. On this principle every man is to accept with equanimity whatever he thinks easy for himself not indeed to do, but to conceive, and is to reject as false and fictitious whatever goes beyond that limit. I beseech you, do not be like these men.

15. These topics are elsewhere more amply discussed, and in fundamental questions of doctrine every intricate point has been opened up by thorough investigation and debate; but faith gives the understanding access to these things, unbelief closes the door. What man might not be moved to faith in the doctrine of Christ by such a remarkable chain of events from the beginning, and by the manner in which the epochs of the world are linked together, so that our faith in regard to present things is assisted by what happened in the past, and the record of earlier and ancient things is attested by later and more recent events? One is chosen from among the Chaldeans, a man endowed with most eminent piety and faith, that to him may be given divine promises, appointed to be fulfilled in the last times of the world, after the lapse of so many centuries; and it is foretold that in his seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed. Genesis 12 This man, worshipping the one true God, the Creator of the universe, begets in his old age a son, when sterility and advanced years had made his wife give up all expectation of becoming a mother. The descendants of this son become a very numerous tribe, being increased in Egypt, to which place they had been removed from the East, by Divine Providence multiplying as time went on both the promises given and the works wrought on their behalf. From Egypt they come forth a mighty nation, being brought out with terrible signs and wonders; and the wicked nations of the promised land being driven out from before them, they are brought into it and settled there, and exalted to the position of a kingdom. Thereafter, frequently provoking by prevailing sin and idolatrous impieties the true God, who had bestowed on them so many benefits, and experiencing alternately the chastisements of calamity and the consolations of restored prosperity, the history of the nation is brought down to the incarnation and the manifestation of Christ. Predictions that this Christ, being the Word of God, the Son of God, and God Himself, was to become incarnate, to die, to rise again, to ascend into heaven, to have multitudes of all nations through the power of His name surrendering themselves to Him, and that by Him pardon of sins and eternal salvation would be given to all who believe in Him — these predictions, I say, have been published by all the promises given to that nation, by all the prophecies, the institution of the priesthood, the sacrifices, the temple, and, in short, by all their sacred mysteries.

16. Accordingly Christ comes: in His birth, life, words, deeds, sufferings, death, resurrection, ascension, all which the prophets had foretold is fulfilled. Matthew 1:22 He sends the Holy Spirit; fills with this Spirit the believers when they are assembled in one house, and expecting with prayer and ardent desire this promised gift. Being thus filled with the Holy Spirit, they speak immediately in the tongues of all nations, they boldly confute errors, they preach the truth that is most profitable for mankind, they exhort men to repent of their past blameworthy lives, and promise pardon by the free grace of God. Signs and miracles suitable for confirmation follow their preaching of piety and of the true religion. The cruel enmity of unbelief is stirred up against them; they bear predicted trials, they hope for promised blessings, and teach that which they had been commanded to make known. Few in number at first, they become scattered like seed throughout the world; they convert nations with wondrous facility; they grow in number in the midst of enemies; they become increased by persecutions; and, under the severity of hardships, instead of being straitened, they extend their influence to the utmost boundaries of the earth. From being very ignorant, despised, and few, they become enlightened, distinguished, and numerous, men of illustrious talents and of polished eloquence; they also bring under the yoke of Christ, and attract to the work of preaching the way of holiness and salvation, the marvellous attainments of men remarkable for genius, eloquence, and erudition. Amid alternations of adversity and prosperity, they watchfully practise patience and self-control; and when the world's day is drawing near its close, and the approaching consummation is heralded by the calamities which exhaust its energies, they,



seeing in this the fulfilment of prophecy, only expect with increased confidence the everlasting blessedness of the heavenly city. Moreover, amidst all these changes, the unbelief of the heathen nations continues to rage against the Church of Christ; she gains the victory by patient endurance, and by the maintenance of unshaken faith in the face of the cruelties of her adversaries. The sacrifice of Him in whom the truth, long veiled under mystic promises, is revealed, having been offered, those sacrifices by which it was prefigured are finally abolished by the utter destruction of the Jewish temple. The Jewish nation, itself rejected because of unbelief, being now rooted out from its own land, is dispersed to every region of the world, in order that it may carry everywhere the Holy Scriptures, and that in this way our adversaries themselves may bring before mankind the testimony furnished by the prophecies concerning Christ and His Church, thus precluding the possibility of the supposition that these predictions were forged by us to suit the time; in which prophecies, also, the unbelief of these very Jews is foretold. The temples, images, and impious worship of the heathen divinities are overthrown gradually and in succession, according to the prophetic intimations. Heresies bud forth against the name of Christ, though veiling themselves under His name, as had been foretold, by which the doctrine of the holy religion is tested and developed. All these things are now seen to be accomplished, in exact fulfilment of the predictions which we read in Scripture; and from these important and numerous instances of fulfilled prophecy, the fulfilment of the predictions which remain is confidently expected. Where, then, is the mind, having aspirations after eternity, and moved by the shortness of this present life, which can resist the clearness and perfection of these evidences of the divine origin of our faith?

## Chapter 5

17. What discourses or writings of philosophers, what laws of any commonwealth in any land or age, are worthy for a moment to be compared with the two commandments on which Christ says that all the law and the prophets hang: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself"? Matthew 22:37-39 All philosophy is here — physics, ethics, logic: the first, because in God the Creator are all the causes of all existences in nature; the second, because a good and honest life is not produced in any other way than by loving, in the manner in which they should be loved, the proper objects of our love, namely, God and our neighbour; and the third, because God alone is the Truth and the Light of the rational soul. Here also is security for the welfare and renown of a commonwealth; for no state is perfectly established and preserved otherwise than on the foundation and by the bond of faith and of firm concord, when the highest and truest common good, namely, God, is loved by all, and men love each other in Him without dissimulation, because they love one another for His sake from whom they cannot disguise the real character of their love.

18. Consider, moreover, the style in which Sacred Scripture is composed — how accessible it is to all men, though its deeper mysteries are penetrable to very few. The plain truths which it contains it declares in the artless language of familiar friendship to the hearts both of the unlearned and of the learned; but even the truths which it veils in symbols it does not set forth in stiff and stately sentences, which a mind somewhat sluggish and uneducated might shrink from approaching, as a poor man shrinks from the presence of the rich; but, by the condescension of its style, it invites all not only to be fed with the truth which is plain, but also to be exercised by the truth which is concealed, having both in its simple and in its obscure portions the same truth. Lest what is easily understood should beget satiety in the reader, the same truth being in another place more obscurely expressed becomes again desired,

and, being desired, is somehow invested with a new attractiveness, and thus is received with pleasure into the heart. By these means wayward minds are corrected, weak minds are nourished, and strong minds are filled with pleasure, in such a way as is profitable to all. This doctrine has no enemy but the man who, being in error, is ignorant of its incomparable usefulness, or, being spiritually diseased, is averse to its healing power.

19. You see what a long letter I have written. If, therefore, anything perplexes you, and you regard it of sufficient importance to be discussed between us, let not yourself be straitened by keeping within the bounds of ordinary letters; for you know as well as any one what long letters the ancients wrote when they were treating of any subject which they were not able briefly to explain. And even if the custom of authors in other departments of literature had been different, the authority of Christian writers, whose example has a worthier claim upon our imitation, might be set before us. Observe, therefore, the length of the apostolic epistles, and of the commentaries written on these divine oracles, and do not hesitate either to ask many questions if you have many difficulties, or to handle more fully the questions which you propound, in order that, in so far as it can be achieved with such abilities as we possess, there may remain no cloud of doubt to obscure the light of truth.

20. For I am aware that your Excellency has to encounter the most determined opposition from certain persons, who think, or would have others think, that Christian doctrine is incompatible with the welfare of the commonwealth, because they wish to see the commonwealth established not by the steadfast practice of virtue, but by granting impunity to vice. But with God the crimes in which many are banded together do not pass unavenged, as is often the case with a king, or any other magistrate who is only a man. Moreover, His mercy and grace, published to men by Christ, who is Himself man, and imparted to man by the same Christ, who is also God and the Son of God, never fail those who live by faith in Him and piously worship Him, in adversity patiently and bravely bearing the trials of this life, in prosperity using with self-control and with compassion for others the good things of this life; destined to receive, for faithfulness in both conditions, an eternal recompense in that divine and heavenly city in which there shall be no longer calamity to be painfully endured, nor inordinate desire to be with laborious care controlled, where our only work shall be to preserve, without any difficulty and with perfect liberty, our love to God and to our neighbour.

May the infinitely compassionate omnipotence of God preserve you in safety and increase your happiness, my noble and distinguished Lord, and my most excellent son. With profound respect, as is due to your worth, I salute your pious and most truly venerable mother, whose prayers on your behalf may God hear! My pious brother and fellow bishop, Possidius, warmly salutes your Grace.

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