

# St Augustine on the Trinity—IV

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By the end of bk vii Augustine has completed his original programme of first establishing the starting-point of faith—that is to say examining the revelation of the mystery of the Trinity in scripture—and then going on to justify it or account for it, against Arians and others, in the language of metaphysics and logic. His work is finished then, apparently, and yet he is still not half way through. He gives us the key to his intentions in the short prologue to bk viii; he is going to go over the same ground all over again, but in ‘a more inward manner’, a characteristically Augustinian design. So far we have been considering the mystery of the Trinity objectively, as something ‘out there’, seen from the outside. But this can hardly satisfy us unless our interests are merely academic. We must find our way inside the mystery, and the way *into* God is into ourselves. So the way into the mystery of the Trinity leads first into the image of the Trinity which is man. This is the way we will be pursuing in bks viii-xv of the *De Trinitate*.

As it will be an exploration of the image of the Trinity in man, it will be covering the same ground as the first seven books in reverse—a sort of ‘Trinity through the looking-glass’. This notion, it seems to me, serves very well to catch the structure of the whole work; another less bizarre figure for it would be the curve of an arch, but the one of two worlds meeting at the surface of a mirror seems very apt. We begin in bks i-vii with the objective consideration of the mystery, first in bks i-iv with the data of revelation, the long examination of the biblical evidence for the dogma; and then in bks v-vii with a more abstract reflection on it. In bk viii, the central book of the total fifteen, we come to the surface of the mirror, the point of contact between the divine reality and its created image, the point of entry into the interior. Thus bk viii stands alone, an indispensable introduction indeed to the books on the image that follow, but not actually forming part of them. As we shall see, St Augustine tries in this book to grasp God, ‘to perceive with the mind the essence of truth’, as he puts it. He is quite aware that he will not be successful, but this opening fling enables him to introduce the categories of his intended discussion of the image.

In bks ix-xi we are well through the looking-glass, examining and

talking about the image. These books are as it were the corresponding reflection of bks v-vii in the first half of the work; the approach is metaphysical, the scriptures are not used more than incidentally, for the image being in fact our own human selves, the data for a study of it are provided immediately by our own experience of ourselves and not by revelation. But the image is being continually referred, at every step of its examination, to the divine Trinity of which it is the image.

In bks xii-xv, which correspond to bks i-iv of the first half where the scriptural revelation of the Trinity was investigated, the image is as it were tested by scripture and given its definitive value. We observe both its inescapable limits and deficiencies, as created image of uncreated being, and its essential manner of realization.

Though Augustine does not mention the image at all in bk viii, he has given us a clue that he intends to seek an entry into the mystery of the Trinity through the image, by an apparently casual but detailed digression on the image which introduces all the biblical texts on the subject at the end of bk vii. Having quoted Gen. 1. 26, 'Let us make man to our own image and likeness', as a text that insinuates the plurality of divine persons, he continues:

But because that image of God was not made absolutely equal to him, being created by him and not born of him, it is his image in such a way as to be 'to' his image; which signifies that it does not match him with exact equality, but approaches him by a certain likeness. For it is in terms of likeness, not of space and place, that one approaches God, and of unlikeness that one draws away from him.

There are some who see a different distinction; they say that the title of image, pure and simple, belongs to the Son, and that man is not the image, but 'to' the image of God. But the Apostle rebuts them by saying, 'The man ought not to cover his head, because he is the image and glory of God' (1 Cor. 11. 7); 'image' is what he said, not 'to the image'. And when elsewhere the expression 'to the image' is used, it is not as though to say 'on the model of the Son', the image which is equal to the Father; otherwise it would not say 'to *our* image'. How, on this view, could it be *ours*, since the Son is the image of the Father alone?

But as we have stated, man is said to be 'to the image' in virtue of his unequally matched likeness; and 'to *our* image' to make man the image of the Trinity; not equal to the Trinity as the Son is to the Father, but approaching it, as we have said, by a certain likeness; just as you can talk about a kind of proximity, not of place but of

imitation, even between distant objects. This is the bearing of various sayings of St Paul's: 'Be refashioned in the newness of your minds' (Rom. 12. 2), he bids us; and again, 'Be imitators therefore of God, as most dear children' (Eph. 5. 1); for this is all being said to the new man 'who is being renewed for the recognition of God after the image of him who created him' (Col. 3. 10). (vii, 6 (12))

The key sentence in this passage is the one that says 'it is in terms of likeness that one approaches God and of unlikeness that one draws away from him'. The whole motive behind Augustine's work is precisely to draw near, to approach, the divine Trinity, not merely to study it. Indeed the phrase 'merely to study' is one that could scarcely be translated into a language he would have understood. For him study, the effort to understand, was a supremely moral activity, inseparable from love and desire, requiring purification of the heart by faith, that is conversion, if it were to achieve anything. And there is only one thing it is intended to achieve—access or approach to God. Thus in our study of the image of the Trinity in man, we are not just observing it in order to seize in it as comprehensively and accurately as possible the imaged reality; we are above all learning how to play the image ourselves, because it is only by actuating or realising the image in us that we can draw near to God whose image it is.

We begin our attempt to draw near to God with great vigour in bk viii, though not yet explicitly in terms of likeness.

There, see, if you can, O soul weighed down with a body that perishes, laden with many and various earthly thoughts (Wisd. 9. 15); there, see, if you can—God is truth. For scripture actually says, 'God is light' (1 Jn. 1. 5); not the sort which these eyes of ours see, but the sort the heart sees when you hear, 'It's the truth'. Now don't ask 'What is truth?' Immediately a murk of bodily images and clouds of fancies will pile up in front and disturb the clear sky that smiled on you the moment I said 'Truth'. There, hold that moment in which the utterance of the word 'Truth' as it were dazzles you with its flash, hold it if you can! But you can't—you slip back into these earthly matters you are used to. And what weight is it, I ask, that pulls you back, if not the weight of the dirt you have picked up on the sticky surface of your greed in the course of your wayward wanderings? (viii 2 (3))

God is truth; grasp truth with the mind, and not only are you approaching God, you have reached him. But we do grasp truth with the mind; it is indeed the cardinal category of thought, so that mental

activity practically consists in judging the truth or untruth of reports, opinions, theories, facts, ideas, etc. And indeed what Augustine is saying is that *God* is the cardinal category of our thought, if only we could see it. It would be simply meaningless to talk about this being true and that being true unless there were some eternal, unchanging, and therefore incorporeal and immaterial Truth to be the ultimate point of reference for our judgments about truth. And this absolute Truth, as people would call it nowadays, is in fact God. So we have access to him, along a 'more inward road', if we have the perseverance to follow our nose for truth; the way of knowledge.

If anyone is inclined to be suspicious of talk about Truth with a capital 'T' as pretentious, possibly meaningless, and in any case too abstract, they have my complete sympathy. But I am of the opinion that St Augustine does not really talk like that; he only sounds as if he does to our ears, because they hear him through the atmospheric interference, usually not consciously noticed, of later and very different philosophies, systems, and habits of thought. 'Truth' for him is not an abstract noun for an abstract concept or idea. It is an abstract noun with a very concrete meaning—the reality of the real. I think one could say that *veritas* means for St Augustine what *esse* means for St Thomas; and God is truth because God alone really and simply and without qualification *is*. The abstract noun 'truth', as Augustine uses it, does not signify the idea, concept, or quality of being true, but the fact of truly being.

But our minds are too immersed in a world of semi-being and only partly truly being, held there by greedy desires and waywardness, to be able bear the brightness of the vision of eternal and unchanging truth. So Augustine now tries the way of desire:

Come, try and see again, if you can. It is certain that you only love the good; and how good the earth is with its lofty mountains and its gentle hills and rolling plains, and how good is a pleasant and fertile farm, how good a house and buildings in their balanced architecture, full of space and light; and how good animals are with their sleek bodies, how good a bracing and healthy air, how good is delicious and healthy food, how good is health without sickness and weariness; how good is a man's face, evenly proportioned, cheerful and bright-eyed, how good is the character of a friend, sharing the same interests, lovingly faithful; how good a just man is, how good riches are because they make things easy, how good the sky is with its sun and moon and stars, how good the angels with their holy obedience,

how good the gift of speech, how good the gift of song!

Why should I go on and on? This is good and that is good; take away this and that, and see good itself, if you can. Then you will see God, good not with any other goodness, but the good of all goodness. And in all these good things I have mentioned, we could not truly say that one thing is better than another, unless we had stamped in us an awareness of the good itself. So God is to be loved, not this or that good, but goodness itself. For we must seek the good of the soul, not a good which it can hover over in judgment, but one it can cling to in love. And what might this be, if not God? Not a good mind, or good angel, or good sky, but good good. (viii 3 (41))

Thus as well as being the cardinal category of our thought, God is also the cardinal category of our willing and our desire. So we have access to him along the way of love as well as the way of knowledge. Augustine concludes the chapter we have just quoted from and begins the next as follows:

This good then is not far from each one of us; 'For in him we live and move and are' (Acts 17. 27-8). But we must be staunch and cling to him in love, in order to enjoy the presence of him from whom we are, whose absence would make it impossible for us to be at all. For since 'we are still walking by faith, not by sight', we do not of course yet see God, as the same writer says, 'face to face' (2 Cor. 5. 7; 1 Cor. 13. 12); and yet if we do not love him now, we never shall see him. (viii 3 (5), 4 (6))

The conditions of our temporal and material being prevent us in fact from seeing God who is the very intimate structure of that being; but they provide us with sure approaches to him, and the surest is the approach of love. However, we are immediately faced with the problem—how can you love something you do not know? A thing can be known and not loved, but to talk about something unknown being loved is nonsense. Now God is unknown as long as we still do not see him, that is perceive him with the mind—and yet we are told the surest approach to him, to bring us in the end to direct knowledge of him, is to love him. The solution is easy; faith. Faith, hope, and charity—St Augustine compares scripture to a vast array of scaffolding and derricks, *machinamenta*, specially designed for building these three in the soul, so that it may believe and hope in what it does not see, and love what it believes.

But this simple answer raises difficulties of its own. When we believe something we are told but have not seen ourselves, we know

what it means; that is to say we have a whole framework of knowledge to which we can refer it, in terms of which we give it the assent of belief. What I am told about New York, which I have no personal knowledge of, I can believe in terms of other cities which I do know. My knowledge of Birmingham or London will doubtless distort the imaginative image I compose to myself of New York (supposing I have seen no pictures of it, as I presume Augustine had seen none of Alexandria, which is the unknown city he takes as his example); still they provide me with the generic categories and classes of ideas—streets, parks, buildings, traffic and sub-ways, etc.—which make it possible for me to *understand* what I am told and what I believe about New York.

Similarly, my knowledge of classes of things enables me to understand what I am told and what I believe about our Lord, that he was true man, that he was born of a virgin, that he died on the cross and rose from the tomb on the third day. It is true that I have never encountered a virgin birth or a resurrection from the dead; but I know what 'virgin' and 'birth' and 'dead' and 'alive' mean—in terms of my own first hand experience or knowledge. Thus faith in things not directly known is constructed on the knowledge of experience—it is a sort of extension of experience. Now let us try applying this to our faith in the Trinity, which is the object of all our quest:

So then, since it is the eternity and equality and unity of the Trinity that we are yearning to understand, and that we have to believe before we can understand, we must beware of our faith being made up. For it is by the enjoyment of this Trinity that we are going to live in bliss; but if we have believed something untrue about it, our hope will be empty, our charity not chaste. So how are we to love, by believing, this Trinity we have never known? In terms of the specific and generic knowledge which are the categories by which we believe and love the apostle Paul? For we know what a man is, and so we believe about him what we find in ourselves.

Then what specific or generic knowledge have we got about that sublime Trinity, as though there were many such trinities some of which we have experienced, so that we can believe that one to be such as they and fit it into a specific or generic class? Clearly none at all . . . When we say and believe that the Trinity is, we know what trinity is because we know what three is; but this is not what we love. We can get that easily enough whenever we like, to mention nothing else, by playing quick-as-a-flash with three fingers.

But what we love, surely, is not what every trinity is but what God's Trinity is; so what we love in the Trinity is that it is God. But we have never seen or got to know any other god, because God is one, there is only he whom we have not yet seen, and whom, in believing, we love. But what we are in search of is precisely in terms of what likeness or comparison of things known we can believe, so that we can also love the not yet known God. (viii 5 (8) )

'So turn back with me', he continues, 'and let us consider why we love the Apostle'. We love him because he is a just man, or to put it another way, what we love about him is the *animus justus*, the just character, which we believe him to have had. But for this belief to mean anything, and to provide a valid foundation for our love of the Apostle, we must *know* what it means to be just, exactly as we know what it means to have a mind or character. We know what this means by our self-experience, from our own minds and characters. But how do we know what being just means, if we are not just ourselves? If you answer that only the just man can know what being just means, then it follows that only the just man can love a just man for his justness; which leaves no room for the person who is not yet a just man, but wants to become one. This man then, who is a genuine and common case, must know what being just means, even though he is not just himself. Where does he know it, in what object or exemplar or instance can he observe it? It can only be in himself. If you say he could ask someone else, or even mark the just life of a just man he knows and does not merely believe about (like St Paul) then it is still the case that in order to understand the answer or appreciate the just man's life, he must be able to see what justice means in himself; for it is not a corporeal physical reality, to be seen with the eyes in his head.

What does he see then in himself, that is in his mind? Another just mind in his own not yet just mind? What he sees is 'inner truth, present to the mind which can look upon it; not all indeed can, and of those who can, not all are what they look upon, that is they are not all just minds though they can see and say what a just mind is'. But it is only by clinging to that form which they look upon and being formed by it that they can themselves become just.

And how does one cling to that form (that eternally true essence of what it means to be just) except by loving it? How then can we love someone else for being as we believe just, and not love that form where we see what being just means, so that we might be able to be just ourselves? But unless we loved it, there is no way in which

we could love another man for its sake; still, as long as we are not just ourselves, we love it less than is necessary to enable us to become so. So a man who is believed to be just is loved in virtue of that form and truth; but that form and truth cannot be loved in virtue of anything else. (viii 6 (9) )

So we are back again with love. 'In this question about the Trinity that occupies us, and about knowing God, we do not have to take notice of anything very much except about what love is. True love is that clinging to truth we should live justly' (viii 7 (10) ). This means despising all mortal things for love of men, by which we desire them to live justly.

St Augustine has evidently gone round in a circle. He would be the last to deny it himself. But circling is only a fault when you are trying to prove something, arguing from one point to the next. Augustine is not trying to prove anything; all his energies are concentrated on *finding* something. He is engaged on a quest, for God, and to go painstakingly round in circles, widening or diminishing, when you are hunting for something is a reasonable procedure. So now his intricate convolutions have brought him to a consideration of charity, of the twin precept to love God and love one's neighbour. He shows that its two members are mutually inclusive, and continues:

Therefore those who look for God (notice the pre-occupation with *search*) by means of these powers that preside over the world or parts of it (the allusion is to astrologers and magicians, principally), find themselves carried a long way away from him—not by intervening space but by divergence of their dispositions; they are trying to go by an outward route, and they neglect their own inwardnesses, within which, more inward still, is God. (viii 7 (11) )

In his circular questings Augustine keeps a very clear sense of direction; the movement is always inwards, inwards and upwards. The example of our Lord confirms him, for he performed external marvels to catch people's attention, and then 'turned them towards the eternal and inward things by saying "Come to me all you who are weary and overburdened, and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon you"—and he did not say "and learn of me because I raise those who have been four days dead", but "learn of me because I am meek and humble of heart"' (Mt. 7. 12). (*ibid.*)

Deepest within of everything is love, and God is love (I Jn. 4. 8). So you can be in God and have him and know him by loving your brother.

Let nobody say 'I do not know what to love'. Let him love his brother, and he will love love itself. He is better acquainted with the love he loves by than with the brother he loves. Why, he can have God better known to him than his own brother; better known because more present to him; better known because more inward; better known because more sure. Embrace love which is God, and embrace God with love. This is the love which joins all the good angels, all the servants of God together in the bond of holiness, and links us and them with one another, and all together with itself. The freer we are of swollen pride (the vice that isolates a man), the fuller we are of love; and what if not God is it that fills a man who is full of love? (viii 8 (12) )

At this point Augustine reminds himself that he is looking precisely for the *Trinity*. 'I see charity, he says, and as far as I can I gaze at it and I believe scripture telling me that "God is charity, and he who abides in charity abides in God" (I Jn. 4. 16); but when I see it, I do not see the Trinity in it'. In proceeding to assure himself that in fact he does, he sets off once again on the circle of truth, goodness, knowledge, faith, and ends up, along trails of thought that are not, I confess, at all clear to me, in displaying a trinity in charity:

What is charity but love of the good? Now love belongs to some lover, and by love something is loved; there you have three—lover, what is loved, and love. So what is love then but a sort of life joining two things together, or seeking to join them, namely the lover and what is loved. And this is so even with external and fleshly loves; but in order to quaff a purer, more limpid draught, let us trample on the flesh and rise up to the mind. What does the mind love in a friend except his mind or character? Here too then there are three; lover, and what is loved, and love. (viii 10 (14) )

The stage is set; we are ready to explore the image, equipped with an assortment of Ariadne's threads to hold onto in our journey into the inner mazes of the soul, in our quest for God who is more inward than the innermost chambers of the self.