

On the Trinity (Book I)

Chapter 1.— This Work is Written Against Those Who Sophistically Assail the Faith of the Trinity, Through Misuse of Reason. They Who Dispute Concerning God Err from a Threefold Cause. Holy Scripture, Removing What is False, Leads Us on by Degrees to Things Divine. What True Immortality is. We are Nourished by Faith, that We May Be Enabled to Apprehend Things Divine.

1. The following dissertation concerning the Trinity, as the reader ought to be informed, has been written in order to guard against the sophistries of those who disdain to begin with [faith](#), and are deceived by a crude and perverse [love](#) of reason. Now one class of such men endeavor to transfer to things incorporeal and spiritual the ideas they have formed, whether through experience of the bodily senses, or by natural [human](#) wit and diligent quickness, or by the aid of art, from things corporeal; so as to seek to measure and conceive of the former by the latter. Others, again, frame whatever sentiments they may have concerning God according to the nature or affections of the [human](#) mind; and through this [error](#) they govern their discourse, in disputing concerning [God](#), by distorted and fallacious rules. While yet a third class strive indeed to transcend the whole creation, which doubtless is changeable, in order to raise their thought to the unchangeable substance, which is [God](#); but being weighed down by the burden of mortality, while they both would seem to [know](#) what they do not, and cannot [know](#) what they would, preclude themselves from entering the very path of understanding, by an over-bold affirmation of their own presumptuous judgments; choosing rather not to correct their own opinion when it is perverse, than to change that which they have once defended. And, indeed, this is the common disease of all the three classes which I have mentioned — viz., both of those who frame their thoughts of God according to things corporeal, and of those who do so according to the spiritual creature, such as is the [soul](#); and of those who neither regard the body nor the spiritual creature, and yet think [falsely](#) about [God](#); and are indeed so much the further from the [truth](#), that nothing can be found answering to their conceptions, either in the body, or in the made or created spirit, or in the Creator Himself. For he who thinks, for instance, that God is white or red, is in [error](#); and yet these things are found in the body. Again, he who thinks of God as now forgetting and now remembering, or anything of the same kind, is none the less in [error](#); and yet these things are found in the [mind](#). But he who thinks that God is of such power as to have generated Himself, is so much the more in [error](#), because not only does God not so exist, but neither does the spiritual nor the bodily creature; for there is nothing whatever that generates its own [existence](#).

2. In order, therefore, that the [human](#) mind might be purged from falsities of this kind, [Holy Scripture](#), which suits itself to babes has not avoided words drawn from any class of things really existing, through which, as by nourishment, our understanding might rise gradually to things divine and transcendent. For, in speaking of [God](#), it has both used words taken from things corporeal, as when it says, Hide me under the shadow of Your wings; and it has borrowed many things from the spiritual creature, whereby to signify that which indeed is not so, but must needs so be said: as, for instance, I the Lord your God am a jealous [God](#); and, It [repents](#) me that I have made man. But it has drawn no words whatever, whereby to frame either figures of speech or enigmatic sayings, from things which do not exist at all. And hence it is that they who are shut out from the [truth](#) by that third kind of [error](#) are more mischievously and emptily vain than their fellows; in that they surmise respecting [God](#), what can neither be found in Himself nor in any creature. For [divine Scripture](#) is wont to frame, as it were, allurements for children from the things which are found in the creature; whereby, according to their measure, and as it were by steps, the affections of the weak may be moved to seek those things that are above, and to leave those things that are below. But the same Scripture rarely employs those things which are spoken properly of [God](#), and are not found in any creature; as, for instance, that which was said to [Moses](#), I am that I am; and, I Am has sent me to you. For since both body and [soul](#) also are said in some sense to be, [Holy Scripture](#) certainly would not so express itself unless it meant to be understood in some special sense of the term. So, too, that which the Apostle says, Who only has [immortality](#). Since the [soul](#) also both is said to be, and is, in a certain manner [immortal](#), Scripture would not say only has, unless because [true immortality](#) is unchangeableness; which no creature can possess, since it belongs to the creator alone. So also James says, Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of Lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. So also David, You shall change them, and they shall be changed; but You are the same.

3. Further, it is difficult to contemplate and fully [know](#) the substance of [God](#); who fashions things changeable, yet without any change in Himself, and creates things temporal, yet without any temporal movement in Himself. And it is necessary, therefore, to purge our minds, in order to be able to see ineffably that which is ineffable; whereto not having yet attained, we are to be nourished by [faith](#), and led by such ways as are more suited to our capacity, that we may be rendered apt and able to comprehend it. And hence the Apostle says, that in Christ indeed are hid all the treasures of wisdom and [knowledge](#); and yet has commended Him to us, as to babes in [Christ](#), who, although already born again by His [grace](#), yet are still carnal and psychical, not by that divine [virtue](#) wherein He is equal to the [Father](#), but by that [human](#) infirmity whereby He

was crucified. For he says, I determined not to [know](#) anything among you, save [Jesus Christ](#) and Him crucified; and then he continues, And I was with you in weakness, and in [fear](#), and in much trembling. And a little after he says to them, And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in [Christ](#). I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto you were not able to bear it, neither yet now are you able. There are some who are [angry](#) at language of this kind, and think it is used in slight to themselves, and for the most part prefer rather to [believe](#) that they who so speak to them have nothing to say, than that they themselves cannot understand what they have said. And sometimes, indeed, we do allege to them, not certainly that account of the case which they seek in their inquiries about [God](#) — because neither can they themselves receive it, nor can we perhaps either apprehend or express it — but such an account of it as to demonstrate to them how incapable and utterly unfit they are to understand that which they require of us. But they, on their parts, because they do not hear what they desire, think that we are either playing them false in order to conceal our own [ignorance](#), or speaking in [malice](#) because we grudge them [knowledge](#); and so go away indignant and perturbed.

Chapter 2.— In What Manner This Work Proposes to Discourse Concerning the Trinity.

4. Wherefore, our Lord God helping, we will undertake to render, as far as we are able, that very account which they so importunately demand: *viz.*, that the Trinity is the one and only and [true God](#), and also how the [Father](#), the [Son](#), and the [Holy Spirit](#) are rightly said, [believed](#), understood, to be of one and the same substance or [essence](#); in such wise that they may not fancy themselves mocked by excuses on our part, but may find by actual trial, both that the highest good is that which is discerned by the most purified minds, and that for this reason it cannot be discerned or understood by themselves, because the eye of the [human mind](#), being weak, is dazzled in that so transcendent light, unless it be invigorated by the nourishment of the righteousness of [faith](#). First, however, we must demonstrate, according to the authority of the [Holy Scriptures](#), whether the [faith](#) be so. Then, if God be willing and aid us, we may perhaps at least so far serve these talkative arguers — more puffed up than capable, and therefore laboring under the more dangerous disease — as to enable them to find something which they are not able to [doubt](#), that so, in that case where they cannot find the like, they may be led to lay the fault to their own minds, rather than to the [truth](#) itself or to our reasonings; and thus, if there be anything in them of either [love](#) or [fear](#) towards [God](#), they may return and begin from [faith](#) in due order: perceiving at length how healthful a medicine has been provided for the faithful in the [holy Church](#), whereby a heedful [piety](#), healing the feebleness of the [mind](#), may render it able to perceive the unchangeable [truth](#), and hinder it from falling headlong, through disorderly rashness, into pestilent and false

opinion. Neither will I myself shrink from inquiry, if I am anywhere in [doubt](#); nor be ashamed to learn, if I am anywhere in [error](#).

Chapter 3.— What Augustine Requests from His Readers. The Errors of Readers Dull of Comprehension Not to Be Ascribed to the Author.

5. Further let me ask of my reader, wherever, alike with myself, he is certain, there to go on with me; wherever, alike with myself, he hesitates, there to join with me in inquiring; wherever he recognizes himself to be in [error](#), there to return to me; wherever he recognizes me to be so, there to call me back: so that we may enter together upon the path of charity, and advance towards Him of whom it is said, Seek His face evermore. And I would make this [pious](#) and safe agreement, in the presence of our Lord [God](#), with all who read my writings, as well in all other cases as, above all, in the case of those which inquire into the unity of the Trinity, of the Father and the [Son](#) and the [Holy Spirit](#); because in no other subject is [error](#) more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of [truth](#) more profitable. If, then, any reader shall say, This is not well said, because I do not understand it; such an one finds fault with my language, not with my [faith](#): and it might perhaps in very [truth](#) have been put more clearly; yet no man ever so spoke as to be understood in all things by all [men](#). Let him, therefore, who finds this fault with my discourse, see whether he can understand other men who have handled similar subjects and questions, when he does not understand me: and if he can, let him put down my book, or even, if he pleases, throw it away; and let him spend labor and time rather on those whom he understands. Yet let him not think on that account that I ought to have been silent, because I have not been able to express myself so smoothly and clearly to him as those do whom he understands. For neither do all things, which all [men](#) have written, come into the hands of all. And possibly some, who are capable of understanding even these our writings, may not find those more lucid works, and may meet with ours only. And therefore it is useful that many [persons](#) should write many books, differing in style but not in [faith](#), concerning even the same questions, that the matter itself may reach the greatest number — some in one way, some in another. But if he who complains that he has not understood these things has never been able to comprehend any careful and exact reasonings at all upon such subjects, let him in that case deal with himself by resolution and study, that he may [know](#) better; not with me by quarrellings and wranglings, that I may hold my peace. Let him, again, who says, when he reads my book, Certainly I understand what is said, but it is not [true](#), assert, if he pleases, his own opinion, and refute mine if he is able. And if he do this with charity and [truth](#), and take the pains to make it [known](#) to me (if I am still alive), I shall then receive the most abundant fruit of this my labor. And if he cannot inform myself, most willing and glad should I be that he should inform those whom he

can. Yet, for my part, I meditate in the law of the Lord, if not day and night, at least such short times as I can; and I commit my meditations to writing, lest they should escape me through forgetfulness; hoping by the mercy of God that He will make me hold steadfastly all truths of which I feel certain; but if in anything I be otherwise minded, that He will himself reveal even this to me, whether through secret inspiration and admonition, or through His own plain utterances, or through the reasonings of my brethren. This I [pray](#) for, and this my trust and desire I commit to Him, who is sufficiently able to keep those things which He has given me, and to render those which He has promised.

6. I expect, indeed, that some, who are more dull of understanding, will [imagine](#) that in some parts of my books I have held sentiments which I have not held, or have not held those which I have. But their [error](#), as none can be [ignorant](#), ought not to be attributed to me, if they have deviated into [false doctrine](#) through following my steps without apprehending me, while I am compelled to pick my way through a hard and obscure subject: seeing that neither can any one, in any way, rightly ascribe the numerous and various [errors](#) of [heretics](#) to the [holy](#) testimonies themselves of the divine books; although all of them endeavor to defend out of those same Scriptures their own false and erroneous opinions. The law of [Christ](#), that is, charity, admonishes me clearly, and commands me with a sweet constraint, that when men think that I have held in my books something false which I have not held, and that same [falsehood](#) displeases one and pleases another, I should prefer to be blamed by him who reprehends the [falsehood](#), rather than praised by him who praises it. For although I, who never held the [error](#), am not rightly blamed by the former, yet the [error](#) itself is rightly censured; while by the latter neither am I rightly praised, who am thought to have held that which the [truth](#) censures, nor the sentiment itself, which the [truth](#) also censures. Let us therefore essay the work which we have undertaken in the name of the Lord.

Chapter 4.—What the Doctrine of the Catholic Faith is Concerning the Trinity.

7. All those [Catholic](#) expounders of the [divine Scriptures](#), both Old and New, whom I have been able to read, who have written before me concerning the Trinity, Who is [God](#), have purposed to teach, according to the [Scriptures](#), this doctrine, that the [Father](#), and the [Son](#), and the [Holy Spirit](#) intimate a divine unity of one and the same substance in an indivisible equality; and therefore that they are not three Gods, but one God: although the Father has begotten the [Son](#), and so He who is the Father is not the Son; and the Son is begotten by the [Father](#), and so He who is the Son is not the Father; and the [Holy Spirit](#) is neither the Father nor the [Son](#), but only the Spirit of the Father and of the [Son](#), Himself also co-equal with the Father and the [Son](#), and pertaining to the unity of the

Trinity. Yet not that this Trinity was born of the [Virgin Mary](#), and crucified under [Pontius Pilate](#), and buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven, but only the Son. Nor, again, that this Trinity descended in the form of a dove upon Jesus when He was [baptized](#); nor that, on the day of Pentecost, after the ascension of the Lord, when there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, the same Trinity sat upon each of them with cloven tongues like as of fire, but only the [Holy Spirit](#). Nor yet that this Trinity said from heaven, You are my Son, whether when He was [baptized](#) by John, or when the three [disciples](#) were with Him in the mount, or when the voice sounded, saying, I have both [glorified](#) it, and will glorify it again; but that it was a word of the Father only, spoken to the Son; although the [Father](#), and the [Son](#), and the [Holy Spirit](#), as they are indivisible, so work indivisibly. This is also my [faith](#), since it is the [Catholic faith](#).

Chapter 5.— Of Difficulties Concerning the Trinity: in What Manner Three are One God, and How, Working Indivisibly, They Yet Perform Some Things Severally.

8. Some [persons](#), however, find a difficulty in this [faith](#); when they hear that the Father is [God](#), and the Son [God](#), and the [Holy Spirit God](#), and yet that this Trinity is not three Gods, but one [God](#); and they ask how they are to understand this: especially when it is said that the Trinity works indivisibly in everything that God works, and yet that a certain voice of the Father spoke, which is not the voice of the Son; and that none except the Son was born in the flesh, and suffered, and rose again, and ascended into heaven; and that none except the [Holy Spirit](#) came in the form of a dove. They wish to understand how the Trinity uttered that voice which was only of the Father; and how the same Trinity created that flesh in which the Son only was born of the Virgin; and how the very same Trinity itself wrought that form of a dove, in which the [Holy Spirit](#) only appeared. Yet, otherwise, the Trinity does not work indivisibly, but the Father does some things, the Son other things, and the [Holy Spirit](#) yet others: or else, if they do some things together, some severally, then the Trinity is not indivisible. It is a difficulty, too, to them, in what manner the [Holy Spirit](#) is in the Trinity, whom neither the Father nor the [Son](#), nor both, have begotten, although He is the Spirit both of the Father and of the Son. Since, then, men weary us with asking such questions, let us unfold to them, as we are able, whatever wisdom God's gift has bestowed upon our weakness on this subject; neither let us go on our way with consuming [envy](#). Should we say that we are not accustomed to think about such things, it would not be [true](#); yet if we acknowledge that such subjects commonly dwell in our thoughts, carried away as we are by the [love](#) of investigating the [truth](#), then they require of us, by the law of charity, to make [known](#) to them what we have herein been able to find out. Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect (for, if the [Apostle Paul](#), how much more must I, who lie far

beneath his feet, count myself not to have apprehended!); but, according to my measure, if I forget those things that are behind, and reach forth unto those things which are before, and press towards the mark for the prize of the high calling, I am requested to disclose so much of the road as I have already passed, and the point to which I have reached, whence the course yet remains to bring me to the end. And those make the request, whom a generous charity compels me to serve. Needs must too, and God will grant that, in supplying them with matter to read, I shall profit myself also; and that, in seeking to reply to their inquiries, I shall myself likewise find that for which I was inquiring. Accordingly I have undertaken the task, by the bidding and help of the Lord my [God](#), not so much of discoursing with authority respecting things I [know](#) already, as of learning those things by piously discoursing of them.