

Augustine - On the Trinity – Book I

Chapter 1: Who this work is written against, and why. How Scripture guides us toward God. What we mean by immortality. How faith feeds us until we can grasp divine things.

1. The reader should know from the outset why I have written this work on the Trinity. It is to guard against the clever-sounding but misleading arguments of people who refuse to start with faith, and who have been led astray by a crude and misguided love of rational argument.

There are roughly three kinds of such people.

The first kind take ideas they have formed about physical, material things — whether through their own sensory experience, or through natural human intelligence and sharp thinking, or through some learned skill — and try to apply those ideas directly to things that are non-physical and spiritual. They try to measure and understand the spiritual by using the physical as their measuring stick.

The second kind build up whatever ideas they have about God by using human nature or human emotions as their model. Through this mistake, they end up governing all their talk about God by distorted and unreliable rules drawn from their own inner experience.

The third kind do at least try to get beyond the whole of creation — which is of course changeable — in order to lift their thinking towards the unchangeable substance that is God. But they are weighed down by the burden of being mortal. They want to appear to know things they don't actually know, and they cannot reach what they are genuinely reaching for. So they block their own path to real understanding by making recklessly overconfident pronouncements. They would rather not correct a wrong opinion than admit they were wrong about something they once defended.

And this last failing — the refusal to correct oneself — is actually the shared disease of all three types. It affects those who think about God in terms of physical things; those who think about God in terms of the spiritual but created mind, such as the human soul; and those who try to think about God in terms of neither body nor spirit and yet still end up with false ideas about him. This third group is actually furthest from the truth of all — because there is nothing anywhere, in the body, in the created spirit, or in God himself, that corresponds to what they have invented.

Consider: the person who thinks God is white or red is wrong — but at least whiteness and redness actually exist, in physical bodies. The person who thinks God sometimes forgets and sometimes remembers is also wrong — but at least forgetfulness and memory really do exist, in the human mind. But the person who thinks God is so powerful that he generated himself — that person is even more wrong, because this doesn't happen anywhere at all, not in God, not in any spirit, not in any body. Nothing whatsoever generates its own existence.

2. Now, in order to clean the human mind of errors like these, Holy Scripture — which adapts itself to those who are still like young children — has not shied away from using words drawn from every class of real, existing things. It uses these as a kind of nourishment, by which our understanding can gradually grow and rise towards things divine and beyond our reach.

When speaking about God, Scripture uses language drawn from physical things — as when it says, *Hide me under the shadow of your wings*. It also borrows a great deal from the world of the spiritual creature — the human mind — to point to things that are not literally so, but which need to be expressed that way. For instance: *I the Lord your God am a jealous God*. Or: *It repents me that I have made man*.

But Scripture never draws its imagery or its figures of speech from things that do not exist at all. This is precisely why the people trapped in that third kind of error — who invent ideas about God that cannot be found in him or in any creature — are more dangerously and emptily mistaken than the others. They are imagining things about God that have no foundation anywhere in reality.

What Scripture generally does is use things found within creation as a kind of attractive lure for those who are still like children — so that, step by step, at their own pace, even weak and immature hearts may be drawn to reach upward and let go of what is below.

Only rarely does Scripture use language that applies to God alone — language pointing to something that has no parallel anywhere in creation. An example is what was said to Moses: *I am that I am*. And: *I AM has sent me to you*. The reason this stands out is that in some sense we also say of bodies and souls that they "are" or "exist." So Scripture would not have expressed itself in this unique and striking way unless it meant to point to something in a specially distinct and absolute sense of being.

The same goes for what the Apostle says: *who alone has immortality*. Because the soul too is said in some sense to be immortal and to exist. Scripture would not say *alone has* unless it meant something very specific — namely that true immortality is unchangeableness. And that belongs to no creature, only to the Creator.

James makes a similar point: *Every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.* And David says: *You will change them and they will be changed — but you are the same.*

3. It is genuinely difficult to contemplate and fully grasp the substance of God — who shapes changeable things and yet undergoes no change in himself, who creates things that exist in time and yet makes no temporal movement himself.

And so it is necessary to clean up our minds before we can hope to see — in a way that goes beyond all words — the one who is beyond all words. We have not yet reached that point. So for now we need to be fed by faith and led along paths that suit where we actually are, so that we may gradually become fit and capable of grasping the truth directly.

This is why the Apostle says that in Christ all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. And yet the Apostle presented Christ to us — as though to small children — not in terms of the divine power by which he is equal to the Father, but in terms of the human weakness by which he was crucified.

He says: *I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.* And then: *I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.* And a little later he says to them: *I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh — as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not with solid food, because you were not yet ready for it — and even now you are still not ready.*

Now some people take offence at being spoken to like this. They feel it is belittling them. And rather than admitting they cannot understand what is being said, they typically prefer to conclude that the person speaking has nothing worthwhile to say in the first place.

Sometimes we do offer them an explanation — not the full account they are looking for in their questions about God, because neither they nor we are capable of receiving or articulating that — but enough of an explanation to show them how genuinely unready and unfit they are to grasp what they are demanding of us. But because they are not hearing what they want to hear, they assume we are either hiding our own ignorance behind excuses, or deliberately keeping knowledge from them out of spite. And so they go away angry and unsettled.

Chapter 2: How this work plans to discuss the Trinity

4. With the help of our Lord God, then, I will attempt to give the account that these people so insistently demand — that the Trinity is the one and only true God, and to explain how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are rightly said, believed, and understood to be of one and the same substance or essence. I want to do this in such a

way that they cannot feel they are being put off with excuses. I want them to discover through actually working through the argument, both that the highest good is something discerned only by the most thoroughly purified minds — and that the reason they themselves cannot yet discern or understand it is that the eye of the human mind, being weak, is overwhelmed and dazzled by a light so far above it, unless it has first been strengthened by the nourishment of a faith that is lived rightly.

But first we must establish, on the authority of Holy Scripture, whether the faith itself is as I have described. Then — if God is willing and helps us — perhaps we may at least serve these argumentative people — who are more puffed up than they are genuinely capable, and who therefore suffer from a more dangerous condition — by helping them find at least one thing they cannot doubt. That way, in cases where they cannot find the same certainty, they may be led to put the blame on their own minds rather than on the truth itself or on our reasoning. And so, if there is in them any love or fear of God at all, they may come back and start properly, beginning with faith in the right order — seeing at last what a genuinely healing medicine has been provided for the faithful in the holy Church, by which a careful and attentive piety, healing the weakness of the mind, makes it capable of perceiving the unchangeable truth, and keeps it from plunging headlong, through reckless overconfidence, into false and destructive opinion.

And for my own part — I will not shy away from asking questions where I am uncertain, and I will not be too proud to learn where I have been wrong.

Chapter 3: What Augustine asks of his readers. If readers misunderstand, the fault is not necessarily the author's.

5. Let me make a request of my reader. Wherever we are both certain about the same thing, let him come along with me. Wherever we are both uncertain, let him join me in searching. Wherever he realises he has been wrong, let him come back to where I am. Wherever he realises I have been wrong, let him call me back to where he is.

In this way we can set out together on the path of love, and press forward towards the one of whom it is said: *Seek his face always*.

I want to make this honest and careful agreement — in the presence of our Lord God — with everyone who reads my work, in everything I write, but above all in the case of these writings that explore the unity of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Because on no other subject is getting it wrong more dangerous, or the work of inquiry more demanding, or the discovery of the truth more worth having.

So if a reader says, "This is poorly said because I don't understand it" — that reader is finding fault with my way of expressing myself, not with my faith. And it is quite possible

that I could have expressed it more clearly — I won't deny that. But no one has ever spoken in such a way that every person understood everything they said.

Let the person who finds fault with my way of expressing things ask themselves whether, when I am unclear to them, they can understand other writers who have dealt with the same subjects and questions. If they can, then let them put my book down — or throw it away if they like — and spend their time and effort on the writers they do understand. But let them not conclude from this that I should simply have said nothing — just because I have not expressed things as smoothly and clearly as those other writers they prefer. Not everything every writer has ever written reaches every reader. It is quite possible that some people who are capable of understanding even these writings of mine may never come across those clearer works and may only ever encounter mine. That is precisely why it is useful for many people to write many books — in different styles but holding the same faith — on the very same questions. So that the subject can reach the greatest number of people, some through one approach, others through another.

But if the person who complains of not understanding has never been able to follow any careful and precise reasoning on such subjects at all — then let that person work on themselves, through determination and study, so that they may come to understand better. Let them not take it out on me through quarrelling and arguing, trying to make me fall silent.

And let the reader who says, when reading my book, "I understand what is being said, but it isn't true" — let that person assert their own view, and if they can, refute mine. If they do this with genuine love for the truth, and take the trouble to let me know — while I am still alive — I will receive from that the greatest reward of all my labour.

And if they cannot inform me personally, I would be genuinely glad if they would inform whoever they can reach.

As for me — I reflect on the law of the Lord, if not day and night, at least in whatever short stretches of time I can. And I put my reflections in writing so that I don't lose them through forgetting. I trust in God's mercy that he will keep me firm in all the truths I am certain about — and that if I am wrong about anything, he will reveal that to me himself, whether through a quiet inward nudging, or through his own clear utterance, or through the arguments of my fellow Christians. This I pray for. This hope and desire I commit to him who is fully capable both of keeping what he has already given me and of delivering what he has promised.

6. I do expect that some readers with slower understanding will imagine I have held views in certain parts of my book that I have not actually held — or that I have not held views that I have. But their mistake — as no one should need telling — ought not to be laid at my door. If they wander into false teaching by following my steps without actually

grasping what I meant, while I am picking my way through a hard and obscure subject — that is not my fault. Just as no one can rightly blame the holy Scriptures themselves for the many and varied errors of heretics — even though every one of those heretics tries to defend their false opinions out of those very same Scriptures.

The law of Christ — which is love — makes it clear to me, with a kind but firm insistence, that when people believe I have held something false in my books that I have not in fact held, and when one person is troubled by that supposed error and another is pleased by it, I should prefer to be criticised by the one who objects to the error rather than praised by the one who approves of it. Because although the person who criticises is not rightly blaming me — since I never held that error — they are at least rightly criticising the error itself. Whereas the one who praises me is neither rightly praising me — since they think I held what the truth actually censures — nor praising the view itself, which the truth also censures.

With that said, let us begin the work we have taken on — in the name of the Lord.

Chapter 4: What the Catholic faith actually teaches about the Trinity

7. Every Catholic interpreter of the divine Scriptures — both Old and New — that I have been able to read, everyone who has written about the Trinity before me, has aimed to teach, on the basis of Scripture, the following: that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit make known a divine unity of one and the same substance in an equality that cannot be divided. And therefore they are not three Gods but one God.

Even so, the Father has begotten the Son — and so the one who is the Father is not the Son. And the Son is begotten by the Father — and so the one 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 belonging to the unity of the Trinity.

Yet it is not the Trinity as a whole that was born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, buried, rose on the third day, and ascended into heaven — but only the Son.

Nor was it the Trinity as a whole that came down in the form of a dove upon Jesus when he was baptised — but only the Holy Spirit.

Nor was it the Trinity as a whole that spoke from heaven on the day of Pentecost — when after the Lord's ascension there came a sound like a rushing mighty wind, and what looked like tongues of fire rested on each of the disciples — but only the Holy Spirit.

Nor was it the Trinity as a whole that spoke from heaven saying *You are my Son* — whether at his baptism by John, or when the three disciples were with him on the mountain, or when the voice said *I have glorified it and will glorify it again* — but those were words of the Father alone, spoken to the Son.

And yet the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit — because they are indivisible — work indivisibly.

This is my faith, because it is the Catholic faith.

Chapter 5: The difficulties people have with the Trinity — how three can be one God, and how, while working indivisibly, they can still do certain things separately

8. Some people, however, find this faith genuinely difficult to grasp. When they hear that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God — and yet that this Trinity is not three Gods but one God — they ask how they are supposed to understand that. The difficulty is made sharper by this: we say the Trinity works indivisibly in everything God does — and yet a particular voice of the Father was heard which was not the voice of the Son; and it was only the Son, not the others, who was born in human flesh, who suffered, died, rose again, and ascended into heaven; and it was only the Holy Spirit who appeared in the form of a dove.

So people want to know: how did the Trinity — working indivisibly — produce a voice that belonged only to the Father? How did the same Trinity create the flesh in which only the Son was born of the Virgin? How did that same Trinity bring about the form of a dove in which only the Holy Spirit appeared?

Because if the Trinity doesn't work indivisibly — if the Father does some things, the Son does others, and the Holy Spirit does yet others — then they are not truly indivisible. But if they do everything together and yet certain things are attributed to one alone, that seems contradictory.

There is also a further difficulty: how the Holy Spirit fits into the Trinity at all — given that he was not begotten by the Father, nor by the Son, nor by both together, even though he is the Spirit of both the Father and the Son.

Since people keep pressing us with these questions, let us try — as best we can — to unfold whatever wisdom God in his generosity has granted to our limited understanding on this subject. Let us not hold it back out of mean-spirited reluctance to share.

If I were to say I never think about such things, that would be untrue. And if I admit that these questions do regularly occupy my thoughts — driven as I am by a love of pursuing the truth — then those who are asking are right to call on me, by the law of love, to share with them whatever I have managed to work out.

I do not claim to have already arrived or to be already complete. If even the Apostle Paul said that — how much more must I, who am so far beneath him, count myself as one who has not yet fully grasped it. But according to whatever measure I have reached — forgetting what lies behind, reaching forward to what lies ahead, pressing on towards the goal — I am being asked to describe as much of the road as I have already travelled, and the point I have reached so far, with the rest of the journey still ahead of me.

And those who ask are people whom a generous love compels me to serve.

I am also convinced — and God will make it so — that in providing them with something to read, I will profit myself as well. In seeking to answer their questions, I too will find something I was myself looking for.

And so I have taken on this task, by the command and with the help of the Lord my God — not so much to speak with authority about things I already know, as to come to know those things by thinking through them devoutly as I write.