

eagerly for one's Maker and when one finds him, adheres to him with all one's might." The virtues work through love, for the sake of love, and receive their grace and strength from love. Seek not this good or that good, says Augustine, but the "good of every good" and cleave to it in love.<sup>36</sup> When love is fixed on God virtue becomes radiant.

## The Knowledge of Sensuous Intelligence

Abiding provenance I would have said  
 the question stands  
 even in adoration  
 clause upon clause  
 with or without assent  
 reason and desire on the same loop—  
 I imagine singing I imagine  
 getting it right—the knowledge  
 of sensuous intelligence  
 entering into the work—  
 spontaneous happiness as it was once  
 given our sleeping nature to awake by  
 and know  
 innocence of first inscription

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IN THE GREEK version of the Song of Songs read in the early church, the bride says to her beloved, "I am wounded by your love" (Song of Sol. 2:5). Gregory of Nyssa took this to mean that the "arrows" of the bridegroom had "penetrated the depths of her heart." The sublime arrow that enters our "inmost being," he wrote, is Christ, the "chosen arrow" of the prophet Isaiah

(49:2). When the soul is wounded by the piercing shafts of Christ's love, it is set ablaze and, in his happy phrase, offers a "reciprocating love." Saint Theresa of Avila, the great Spanish mystic, would echo this sentiment centuries later: "Love calls for love in return."<sup>1</sup>

Nothing is more characteristic of the Christian intellectual tradition than its fondness for the language of the heart. In the famous passage at the beginning of Augustine's *Confessions*, it is the heart that is restless until it rests in God, and much later in the same book he says it is love that carried him to God: "By God's gift we are set on fire and carried upwards; we grow red hot and ascend. We climb 'the ascents in our heart'" (Ps. 83:6). In a memorable passage in the *City of God* Augustine says that the "flame on the altar of the heart" is the "burning fire of love." We "direct our course toward [God] with love."<sup>2</sup>

In the first chapter of this book I quoted Origen's response to Celsus's taunt, "What was the purpose of God's descent to human beings?" Origen answered that God had entered our world in the person of Christ to "implant in us the happiness that comes . . . from knowing him." Origen's two locutions, "happiness" and "knowing God," can serve to draw together the many themes that have been in play in this book. For the knowledge that brings happiness is ours only in love. Unlike knowledge from a distance, for example, observing an object in the world, the knowledge of God, says Origen, is "fellowship with God through Christ."<sup>3</sup> The church fathers were very sure of their footing on this point, as Gregory of Nyssa shows in his explanation of the term *see* in the beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall *see* God." In the usage of the Scriptures, says Gregory, *see* means the same as *have*. When the psalmist says,

"May you *see* the good things of Jerusalem," he does not mean that one will look at the good things of Jerusalem, but that one will possess them. Therefore the one "who *sees* God *possesses* . . . all there is of the things that are good." Jesus did not teach, "It is blessed to know something *about* God"; he said that blessedness "is possessing God within oneself," to be known by God, not only to know God.<sup>4</sup> Happiness is found not in receiving something from God but in enjoying the presence of God, what the psalmists call the "face of God." Love is the one human endowment that moves us to seek the face of God.

At one point in the *Paradiso* Dante asks Beatrice why God willed "precisely this pathway for our redemption," namely, the Incarnation. Beatrice begins her response by reminding Dante that what she is about to explain to him "is buried from the eyes of everyone whose intellect has not matured within the flame of love."<sup>5</sup> Unless we invest ourselves in the object of our love, we remain voyeurs and spectators, curiosity seekers, incapable of receiving because we are unwilling to give. With God irony is blasphemy. Only when we turn our deepest self to God can we enter the mystery of God's life and penetrate the truth of things. If love is absent, our minds remain childish and immature, trying out one thing then another, unable to hold fast to the truth. Human beings, said Dante, are those creatures who "have intelligence *and* love."<sup>6</sup> In this final chapter the subject must be love.

### *Agape and Eros*

Although the language of love permeates the Scriptures, in the early centuries of the church's history it was not apparent how it was to be appropriated and understood. In Greek (and also in Latin) there were several words for love. One term, often simply

transliterated into English as *agape*, signified charity, care for others, whereas another, *eros*, designated erotic love, and a third, *philia*, referred to friendship. But the boundaries between the several terms were fluid, and the sense was fixed more by context than by the words themselves. In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* Origen observed that the Scriptures prefer the term *agape* to *eros* when speaking of love so that “no moral lapse would come about in its readers.” Yet the appearance of the term *agape* instead of *eros* is sometimes anachronistic. In Genesis it is said that Isaac “took Rebecca, and she became his wife and he was charitable toward her [loved her with *agape*].” What is meant, of course, is not charity but erotic love. Likewise, when the Bible says of Rachel, “But Rachel was beautiful in form and fair in countenance and Jacob was charitable toward her” (Gen. 29:17), the writer is speaking of *eros*. According to Origen, the Scriptures avoid the word *eros* to avoid offending sensitive readers.

There are, however, some instances in which the term *desire* or *erotic love* is used with respect to spiritual matters. In Proverbs it is said of Wisdom, “Love her passionately [that is, love her with *eros*], and she will preserve you; embrace her, and she will exalt you” (Prov. 4:6). And in the book of the *Wisdom of Solomon*, it is written, “I have become a passionate lover of her [Wisdom’s] beauty” (Wisdom 8:2). Origen opines that even though *agape* is more frequent in the Bible, the Scriptures allow both terms, and in some cases when it uses *agape* it means *eros*.<sup>7</sup> Clearly he is trying to find a way to domesticate the term *eros* for Christian use. Even at this early stage in Christian history one of its most acute thinkers sensed that in relation to God something more than *agape* was called for.

Early Christian thinking, as we have seen on various occa-

sions in this book, was often in direct conversation with philosophical ideas current in Roman society. In some cases, Christians were sharp critics of traditional views, as, for example, how God was known; in other cases, for example, the cardinal virtues, they welcomed the wisdom of the past, adapting and modifying it as they saw fit. In discussing the term *love*, Origen gives the impression he is engaged in an exercise in biblical lexicography, but the issue was philosophical and theological, not philological. His interpretation of biblical language was in fact addressing an ancient philosophical debate about the role of the passions in the moral life.

According to the Stoics, the life of virtue required detachment from the passions, those unruly motions like fear, anger, jealousy, and passionate love that drive human behavior against reason toward unwanted ends. The sage strives to be totally self-sufficient, free of the disordered impulses that deflect one from pursuing what is good and noble. Tranquility of soul is the mark of wisdom. Consequently, if one is to live virtuously the passions were not to be moderated or channeled, but rather rooted out or, in the language of the Stoics, extirpated. Modern scholarship has shown that the Stoic account of the passions is more subtle than the views often attributed to them. Yet in antiquity the lines were drawn clearly, and Christians found that they had to choose whether to side with the Stoics or take up intellectual arms against them.<sup>8</sup>

Some Christian thinkers were attracted to the views of the Stoics and thought that Jesus was the exemplar of a life freed of the passions, what the ancients called *apatheia*, indifference to the passions. Clement of Alexandria said that by his mastery over pain and suffering Jesus showed he was beyond passion,

and his disciples, by following the Lord's teaching and example, had learned to live in an "unwavering disposition of self-discipline." Like Christ, they were able not only to overcome anger, fear, and desire, but also to learn to be indifferent even to such emotions as zeal and joy. "Apatheia is the fruit of eliminating desire completely." Other writers adopted a position similar to Clement. One of the most influential was the monastic writer Evagrius Ponticus. In his view the chief impediment to spiritual growth was thoughts, those distracting images that crowd the mind and lure it away from contemplating God. For Evagrius such thoughts were associated with the passions, chiefly desire and anger. Only when these refractory impulses are tamed can one achieve the goal of apatheia. Apatheia is the sign of a "healthy soul," a soul cleansed of turbulent emotions.<sup>9</sup>

Yet even when Christian thinkers defended apatheia as the goal of life, they could not avoid the language of love. In the passage from Clement cited above, after he presents the apostles in the guise of Stoic sages, he adds, almost parenthetically, that nothing can separate the mature Christian from "love toward God." For the true Christian "always loves God and is turned toward him." How, one might ask, can love be a matter of indifference? Here as in other places in his writings Clement's philosophical instincts pull him in one direction, while the language and logic of the Scriptures point him in another. Even for Evagrius love is the "offspring of apatheia." The Stoic notion of apatheia rests uneasily alongside the biblical injunction to love God with all one's heart and is hard to reconcile with passages in the Bible that urge the believer to desire wisdom or thirst for God, not to mention the frequent references to such affections as joy, gratitude, sorrow, compassion, zeal, fear, even anger. As

Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth-century American theologian, wrote in his book on the religious affections, "The holy Scriptures do everywhere place religion very much in the affections; such as fear, hope, love, hatred, desire, joy, sorrow, gratitude, compassion, and zeal."<sup>10</sup>

#### *Without Anger There Is No Virtue*

By the third century some Christian thinkers, on the basis of the Scriptures, already had begun to question the conventional Stoic presentation of the moral life. The first was a little-known Latin writer by the name of Lactantius, sometimes called the Christian Cicero because he wrote graceful Latin prose. Lactantius lived at the end of the third century and was the author of several works, one of which was a wide-ranging defense of Christianity to the cultured elite of the Roman world. He does not have the depth of Origen or Augustine, yet on certain matters his instincts are uncommonly perceptive, and he notices things that escape others. He was the first thinker in Western culture to defend freedom of religion on religious grounds. Religion must be voluntary, he wrote, for "nothing requires freedom of the will as religion."<sup>11</sup> He also wrote a fascinating book entitled *On the Wrath [or Anger] of God* that argued against the philosophical assumption of the impassibility of God. According to the Bible, he said, God was moved by love *and* wrath.

Lactantius thought that the Stoic rejection of the passions rendered moral life otiose. The Stoics call "mercy [*misericordia*], desire, and fear diseases of the soul."<sup>12</sup> But in the beatitudes Jesus urges his followers to be merciful: "Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy [*misericordia*]" (Matt. 5:7). Although Lactantius begins his discussion with a citation from the Scrip-

tures, as the argument unfolds it is clear he is drawing on a philosophical critique of human action. The key failing of the Stoic doctrine was that it could not give an adequate account of what moved the soul to act.

As Lactantius knew well, the term *moved* came from Aristotle and had a venerable pedigree in ancient moral philosophy. In discussing the movements of the soul in his treatise *The Movement of Animal Beings*, Aristotle had argued that all movement can be reduced to thought and desire. Without a conception of what is to be done, we do not know what we are to do, but without desire, without an inner movement that draws us to that we have envisioned, there will be no action. "The proximate reason for *movement*," writes Aristotle, "is desire." Drawing on this explanation of human action, Lactantius argued that the Stoics "deprive human beings of all the affections by whose impulse the soul is *moved*, namely, desire, delight, fear, grief." These affections have been implanted in us by God for a reason, and without them it is impossible to live virtuously. Even anger, when properly used, can contribute to virtue. In a surprising phrase, Lactantius drives home the point: "Without anger there can be no virtue."<sup>13</sup>

Lactantius's criticism of the Stoics, though inspired by the Holy Scriptures, moves along a path worn smooth by Greek and Roman philosophers. In the fourth century, however, Gregory of Nyssa took up the topic afresh and related it to a deeper issue, how human beings know God and cleave to God. His discussion of the passions, though an exercise in moral psychology, is driven by a theological agenda. In Gregory's view, the passions prepare the way for love of God.

### *Love Never Ends*

In antiquity the passions were understood to derive from two fundamental human impulses, desire and fear. Desire is the yearning to possess something we do not have, and fear is aversion to what we do not want. To these two passions were added joy, the possession of what we desire, and grief, having to undergo what we fear. Just as there are four cardinal virtues, prudence, justice, courage and temperance, so there are four cardinal passions, desire, fear, joy, and grief. It should be observed that the passions refer not primarily to bodily drives, for example, hunger or thirst or lust, but have to do with the soul, and in that sense are intellectual, just as, for example, emotions such as envy and jealousy are attitudes, not bodily urges.

Gregory asks whether the two fundamental passions, desire and fear, are intrinsic to the soul. Are they part of human nature, that is, given at creation? or did they come about because of sin? Gregory believes that human beings were not created with passions—in his phrase, they are not "consubstantial with human nature"—but he is clearly uncomfortable with that answer. Somewhat implausibly he brings forth Moses as an example of a holy man of God who overcame the passions (ignoring Exodus 32:19, in which Moses' anger "burned hot" against the worship of the golden calf), but his more telling examples are biblical figures who used the passions in god-pleasing ways. The first is Phineas, who is said to have pleased God when his anger was inflamed against the Israelite who married a Midianite woman (Num. 25:11), and Daniel who, in the Greek Bible, is called a "man of desires" (Dan. 9:23, 10:11,19). Further, the Scriptures say that fear is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10) and grief

leads to salvation (2 Cor. 7:10). Accordingly, the affections are not in themselves good or evil, but "impulses of the soul" that can serve good or evil ends. When they move saints to "choose good" they are to be praised; when they drive others to evil they are called passions. Everything depends on the ends toward which they are directed.<sup>14</sup>

Gregory knew that the term *desire* often carried negative overtones in the Scriptures. For example, Saint Paul writes, "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24). Yet Gregory cannot dispense with the term because it is akin to love. At one point he says flatly, "We are led to God by desire, drawn to him as if pulled by a rope." When the soul glimpses the beauty of God, it yearns to see more. Gregory's writings are filled with a seemingly inexhaustible fund of images to depict the longing for God: a lover asking for yet another kiss, a person tasting a sweetness that can be satisfied only by another taste, the dizziness one experiences standing at the edge of a precipice as one peers into a vast space. Even Moses, who had spoken with God face to face (Deut. 34:10), was not satisfied: "He sought God as if he had never seen him. In the same way, all of those in whom the desire of God is deeply imbedded, never cease yearning for more. Every delight in God becomes kindling for a still more ardent desire."<sup>15</sup>

For Gregory this ceaseless yearning has its source in God's infinite beauty and splendor in whose presence one never grows weary: "Every desire for the beautiful that draws us on in this ascent is intensified as the soul progresses toward it. This is what it means to see God: never to have this desire satisfied. . . . No limit can be set to our progress toward God, first because no

limits can be put upon the beautiful, and second, because as our desire increases it never finds satisfaction."<sup>16</sup> Because God is not bound by space or time, the desire for God is unlike desire for things in this world. When, for example, we have yearned for food or drink and receive what we have longed for, our desire ceases. Often our enjoyment falls short of our expectations, and in the very moment of satisfaction, we begin to desire something else. But our yearning to see God will be satisfied only by knowing God more fully and more intimately. The more we know, the more we desire to know.

Desire or eros, then, draws us to God. But Gregory realizes, as he admits in his treatise *The Soul and Resurrection*, that if desire alone moves us, his argument would be working at cross purposes. He had insisted that the passions had come about as a consequence of the fall. Desire is acquisitive and self-centered, driven more by our needs and pleasures than by the object we seek. Hence Gregory says that as one comes into the presence of God desire gives way to love, and what was formerly sought by desire is now possessed in love. As the soul conforms more closely to God, all of its former habits give way to the "interior disposition" of love by which it becomes attached to the beautiful. This is why, writes Gregory, Saint Paul said, "Love never ends." One hopes for that which is not present, and faith has to do with the "assurance of things hoped for." When the promise arrives, however, "the operation of love remains." Love has primacy among the virtues and is first among the commandments.<sup>17</sup>

Only love is continuously fashioning itself according to the beloved. "If love is taken from us how will we remain united to God?" he asks. Desire is a restless activity, a yearning for something one craves but does not possess. Love, even though it is

passionate, has within it an element of repose, of satisfaction, of joy that comes from delight in the presence of the beloved. Desire feeds on absence, love lives off presence. With love come delight, peace, happiness, and, yes, wonder. In one of his more vivid images Gregory compares the contemplation of God to a person looking at a spring that bubbles up from the earth:

As you came near the spring you would marvel, seeing that the water was endless, as it constantly gushed up and poured forth. Yet you could never say that you had seen all the water. How could you see what was still hidden in the bosom of the earth? Hence no matter how long you might stay at the spring, you would always be beginning to see the water. . . . It is the same with one who fixes his gaze on the infinite beauty of God. It is constantly being discovered anew, and it is always seen as something new and strange in comparison with what the mind has already understood. And as God continues to reveal himself, man continues to wonder; and he never exhausts his desire to see more, since what he is waiting for is always more magnificent, more divine, than all that he has already seen.<sup>18</sup>

God is ever new, and it is only love that allows us to dwell within the house of God's abundant life. The knowledge of God is not a sudden glimpse of a strange, unfamiliar reality, but a deep, abiding joy that continually changes the lover. "Through the movement and activity of love," writes Gregory, "the soul clings to [the good] and mingles with it, fashioning itself to that which is being continually grasped and discovered anew." By love we dwell in God and God dwells in us, and as we come to know God by loving him, we discover that what we thought we

knew we do not know, and what we did not know, we now know. In words of Saint Paul Gregory was fond of citing, "If any man imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if one loves God, one is known by him" (1 Cor. 8:2).<sup>19</sup>

#### *Love and Gladness in the Life to Come*

Almost every topic that provoked discussion in the early church (and many that did not) appears somewhere in Augustine's *City of God*. In it Augustine also takes up the subject of the passions in Christian life, and his reasoning moves along lines sketched out by Lactantius a century earlier and Gregory in the generation before him. In fact, the topic presented itself to him in the same terms it did to Lactantius. What, in light of the Scriptures, is a Christian thinker to make of the Stoic rejection of the passions? Like Lactantius, Augustine realized that the philosophers were divided on the topic; he first sets forth the views of the Platonists and Aristotelians that the passions can be regulated by reason, and then the view of the Stoics that the passions have no place in the life of a sage. Yet Augustine believes that the differences between the schools have more to do with definitions than with the subject matter itself, for both "champion the mind and reason against the tyranny of the passions." He cites an apt passage from Virgil to drive home his point: "His mind unmoved, the tears roll down in vain."<sup>20</sup>

The chief target of Augustine's criticism, however, is the Stoic philosophers, and the starting point for his critique is the language of the Scriptures. Like Lactantius, he singles out the word *compassion* and chides the Stoics for condemning this passion as an emotion of the weak. Compassion, replies Augustine,

is surely proper if it is directed to a good end. Why should one not be disturbed when someone is in danger and come quickly to the person's aid? The question is not whether one is angry or sad or fearful, but why. Everything turns on the object. For this reason Christians, "citizens of the Holy City of God," believe that the passions, "fear and desire, pain and gladness," have an honorable place in Christian life. If their "love is right," then the "passions are right in them."<sup>21</sup>

Augustine gives some apt examples from the Scriptures. It is right to fear eternal punishment and to desire eternal life, to fear sin and desire to persevere in faith. Jesus said, "Because wickedness will abound, the love of many will grow cold" (Matt. 24:12), and the Scriptures make clear that one should "feel gladness" in doing good works, for it is written, "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:8). He mentions Paul as someone who rejoices with those who rejoice, was troubled by fears within, desired to depart and be with Christ. He longs to see the Christians in Rome, is jealous for the faithful at Corinth, and experiences "pain in his heart" and grief. Augustine's point is clear. It is not possible to live a mature Christian life without the affections. Even the saints are moved to action by feelings and attitudes and emotions. Hence he concludes that the "emotions and feelings that spring from love of the good and from holy charity" are not, as the Stoics claim, "morbid or disordered passions" but virtues. Even the Lord displayed human emotions when it was called for.<sup>22</sup> The movements of the soul are the springs of activity that move the will to the good.

Certain of the passions, for example, fear and grief, are necessary only in this life. If not disciplined by reason, like the legs of a young colt they bolt out of control. With respect to these

passions, apatheia, detachment from the passions, does have a place in the life to come, but only with respect to them. One would hardly claim, says Augustine, that the goal is to be "free of any emotion whatsoever." "Only a man utterly cut off from truth would say that *love* and *gladness* will have no place" in the life to come. For only in love can we enjoy the presence of God. Augustine ends very much at the same place Gregory did. "Let us come," he says, "not with our feet but with our affections; let us come not by moving from one place to another, but by loving. . . . When someone is transported by the heart he changes his affection by the movement of the heart."<sup>23</sup>

#### *The Blessed Passion of Love*

In matters of the spirit Maximus the Confessor writes with the certainty only experience can give. His language is more scholastic than Augustine's, but like Augustine he speaks about what he knows. And what he knew was that God could be known only in love. Here Maximus's thought flows deep, and he speaks about the affections with the authority of a spiritual master. In Christian thinking the affections are an affair of first things. One of Maximus's most bracing books, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, is a penetrating and original exposition of difficult texts from the Bible. At the very beginning, in the first question, Maximus poses a question that had troubled earlier writers: Are the passions evil or do they become evil through use?

Like Gregory, Maximus believed that the passions were not part of the original creation of human beings, but he also knew that such an answer was so incomplete as to be misleading. For without the movement of the affections there could be no virtuous life, and without love to hold us to God we would have no

enduring relation to God. Hence he answers the question in this way: "In the devout person the passions become good when they prudently turn away from earthly things and put themselves at the service of possessing heavenly things." "Desire," says Maximus, "brings about an insatiable spiritual movement that drives us toward divine things," that is, to God, and delight becomes "the quiet joy that comes from the activity of the mind firmly attached to the divine gifts." Maximus's language is unconventional, but his point is original. Knowledge "without passion" does not bind the mind to God. Love gives "reality to faith" and "makes hope present."<sup>24</sup>

Maximus also mentions the two negative passions, fear and grief, but the thick oxygen that courses through his discussion is the positive passions, desire that draws us toward God and delight in God. For the movement *away* from evil is always a movement *toward* God, and the goal of human life is to enjoy the presence of God. Not having passions, human beings would be unable "to hold fast to virtue and knowledge" and would have an inconstant and irresolute attachment to the One who alone is to be enjoyed. As biblical warrant for his view he cites 2 Corinthians 10:5: "We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ." Maximus understands Paul's "thought" to refer to the unruly passions, hence what Paul is saying is that the passions "become good" when properly used, that is, when they are subject to Christ. "In no other way," he writes, "except through the passions that are implanted in us can we have a spiritual relation to God."<sup>25</sup>

Although Maximus defends the right use of the passions, he also holds to the term *apatheia*, impassibility. For him *apatheia*

means not Stoic detachment, but spiritual freedom, the gift of love by which we give ourselves in total devotion to God. *Apatheia* is a "firm and steadfast disposition" by which one "comes to rest" in that which is "ultimately desirable." The alternative to *apatheia* is not being unmoved but being moved by self-love, the "mother of the passions," which distorts our desires and turns them into vices. *Apatheia*, like *ascesis*, is not a negative goal, giving up something, but a turning toward something, a loosening of the bonds that enslave us to disordered loves, the freedom to attach ourselves to God in love. In love, he says, the mind "transfers its whole longing to God." Indeed Maximus identifies *apatheia* with love. In prayer, he says, one can reach the "full measure of *apatheia* and love."<sup>26</sup>

Like Origen and Gregory and Augustine—indeed, like all of the thinkers considered in this book—Maximus knew that the knowledge of God was participatory, a knowledge that changes the knower: "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God." Only those who have been cleansed, purified, and transformed can know God. Maximus puts it this way: "Knowledge of divine things *without passion* does not persuade the mind to disdain material things completely, but is like a mere thought of a thing known by the senses. . . . For this reason there is a need for the blessed *passion of holy love* that binds the mind to spiritual realities [that is, God] and persuades it to prefer the immaterial to the material and intelligible and divine things to those of sense."<sup>27</sup>

In the third century Origen had explained that in the Scriptures the term *knowledge* was used in a very particular way. Commenting on John 8:19, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also," he says,

“One should take note that the Scripture says that those who are united to something or participate in something are said to *know* that to which they are united or in which they participate. Before such union and fellowship, even if they understand the reasons given for something, they do not know it.” As illustration he mentions the union between Adam and Eve, which the Bible described as “Adam knew his wife Eve,” and 1 Corinthians 6:16–17, union with a prostitute. These passages show, he says, that *knowing* means “being joined to” or “united with.”<sup>28</sup> Then Origen adds, if we do not take *know* to mean “being united with,” how do we explain the words of Paul, “But now having known God, or rather to be known by God” (Gal. 4:9)?

When knowledge is understood as participation and fellowship, love is its natural, indeed necessary, accompaniment. Love is self-giving, passionate, unitive, erotic, and Maximus interprets the biblical *agape* with *eros*: “For in the mind of one who is continually in converse with God desire increases beyond measure into divine *eros* and even one’s entire irascible element [anger] is transformed into divine *agape*. For by continual participation in the divine illumination the mind becomes altogether filled with light. It makes the passible element one with itself and turns it . . . into burning love [*eros*] that is without end and *agape* that never ceases, passing over completely from earthly to heavenly things.”<sup>29</sup>

Here, as always, Maximus is scrupulous in his choice of terms. He self-consciously and deliberately fills the biblical term *agape* with echoes that are heard in *eros* while at the same time holding steadfastly to the biblical word. It is a shrewd move, one he may have learned from Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, the enigmatic thinker who lived a century earlier. In a deliberately play-

ful passage, Pseudo-Dionysius explains how the language of love works in the Scripture. “Do not think,” he says, “that in giving status to the term *eros* I am running counter to Scripture.” What, for example, does one make out of this passage from Proverbs about Wisdom (which for Dionysius was Christ): “Desire her and she shall hold you; exalt her and she will extol you” (Prov. 4:6). The careful reader of the Bible will discover that in places the biblical writers used the term *agape* when they mean desire or erotic love, implying that this is the case in other passages. Dionysius’s example comes from the Septuagint version of the first chapter of 2 Samuel (1:26), David’s lament of the death of his friend Jonathan. David cries out, “Your love for me was greater than love for women.” Whereas one would expect to find the term *eros*, or friendship, the Scriptures use *agape*, which leads Dionysius to say, “To those who listen carefully to divine things the term *agape* is used by the sacred writers in divine revelation with the exact same meaning as the term *eros*.”<sup>30</sup>

Maximus loved paradoxical phrases and oxymorons such as “ever-moving repose,” “stationary movement,” “temperate madness,” “sober inebriation,” “moving rest,” and “blessed passion of love.” He was searching for a vocabulary to say what the psalmist meant with “seek the face of the Lord always,” that the soul that loves God is at rest in God yet at the same time in restless movement toward God. “All things created according to time,” he writes, “become perfect when they cease their natural growth. But everything that the knowledge of God effects . . . when it reaches perfection, moves to further growth.” The end becomes a beginning, for God unceasingly does good things “as though he had never begun them.”<sup>31</sup>

One comes away from reading Maximus, as one does from

reading Augustine, with the sense that the old vessels cannot contain the new wine. He moved in a world that would have been recognized by Augustine. In his *Homilies on First John*, Augustine had described the Christian life as a "holy desire": "That which you desire you do not yet see; but by desiring you become capable of being filled by that which you will see when it comes. For just as in filling a leather bag . . . one stretches the skin . . . and by stretching it becomes capable of holding more; so God by deferring that for which we long, stretches our desire; as desire increases it stretches the mind, and by stretching, makes it more capable of being filled." Maximus may have been exposed to Augustine's writings when he lived in Carthage. The most profound modern interpreter of Maximus's thought, Hans Urs von Balthasar, believed, however, that Maximus was much too original to be dependent on Augustine. "Maximus speaks less as one who has learned something from someone else," von Balthasar writes, "than as one who is in full control of what is distinctively his own."<sup>32</sup> Von Balthasar is surely correct. Yet it is perhaps more to the point to observe that both Maximus and Augustine had taken the words of Jesus to heart: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:40).

In a famous passage in the *Confessions* Augustine recalled that Cicero's *Hortensius* had "changed my feelings." The book did not give him a new perspective on wisdom or change his opinions, but moved him to love wisdom itself, to "hold fast to it," to "embrace it," and take it to himself. Suddenly everything else seemed vain and empty, for Wisdom lit a fire in his heart. Elsewhere in the *Confessions* Augustine, addressing God, says that

his desire was "not to be more certain *about* you, but to be more stable *in* you." The goal of human life is not to know something about God, but to know God and be known by God, to delight in the face of God. The psalmist had written, "My heart has said to thee, I have sought thy face, O Lord, will I seek," and Augustine comments, "This is magnificent. Nothing could be spoken more sublimely. For those who truly love will understand. What does the psalmist seek? 'To gaze upon the Lord's loveliness all the days of his life.' His fear is that he should be deprived of what he loves. And what is that? What does he love? Thy face.'"<sup>33</sup>

The Christian intellectual tradition is an exercise in thinking about the God who is known and seeking the One who is loved. Lacking concepts in the mind and words on the tongue, we cannot speak about what we know, but if we do not love the God to whom these words lead, we do not understand. "Knowledge becomes love," says Gregory, "because that which is known is by nature beautiful." Christian thinking, like all thinking, requires questioning, reflection, interpretation, argument. But reason has short wings. Without love it is tethered to the earth. "Reason and desire," wrote the poet Geoffrey Hill, "on the same loop—I imagine singing I imagine getting it right—the knowledge of sensuous intelligence entering into the work."<sup>34</sup>

## Epilogue

“AMOR IPSE NOTITIA EST” (Love is itself a form of knowledge), wrote Gregory the Great at the end of the sixth century.<sup>1</sup> Along with Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine, Gregory is one of the four Latin doctors, that is, teachers, of the early church. By another calculus he is the first medieval Christian teacher. Sitting astride two worlds, he looks back toward Greek and Latin antiquity and to the church of the Roman Empire and forward to the great flowering of Christian civilization in the high Middle Ages. Revered more as a doer than a thinker, in conventional accounts of early Christian thought his role is not a large one. He lived at a time when the institutions of society had collapsed and as bishop of Rome new tasks were thrust upon him. Vast territories

in southern Italy and Sicily had come under the control of the pope, and some of his letters deal, improbably, with such unlikely matters as the price of wheat in Sicily and the selling of cattle and farm implements. The great theological battles of the early church were past, and Gregory's writings are pastoral, administrative, homiletical, and devotional. Yet his union of life and thought, of contemplation and action, gives him an honored place among the church fathers. For Gregory, as for all the figures who have made an appearance in the pages of this book, thinking about the things of God, like grammar, was not an end in itself; its aim was the love of God and holiness of life. He did not construct a world of ideas for others to admire but one to live in.

Gregory's most beloved and enduring work, the *Moralia on Job*, is a huge, capacious opus in thirty-five books, a leisurely stroll chapter by chapter across every verse of the book of Job. Many of the great themes of early Christian thought appear in the *Moralia*, derived wondrously and mysteriously (at least to modern readers) from the arcane words of Job and his loquacious friends. It is a masterful undertaking, a wise, humane book, at once a compendium of the church's teaching on God, Christ, human beings, and grace and a matchless guide to the spiritual life. Gregory's *Moralia* would be unimaginable without the Bible. His language is suffused with the words of the Scripture, and its metaphors, stories, and heroes pressed themselves on his imagination and gave texture and concreteness to his thinking. His most mature work, the *Moralia* is an audacious yet disciplined meditation on the church's Bible. In the year 600 Gregory is still trying to sort out biblical passages on "seeing God" and to explain how Saint Paul can say that "no one has ever seen or can

see" God (1 Tim. 6:16) and the book of Genesis report that Jacob saw God "face to face" (Gen. 32:30).<sup>2</sup>

These biblical texts and others posed a daunting challenge to Christian thinkers. It was not possible, in the fashion of contemporary biblical scholarship, to account for the differences by appeals to historical context or to the contrasting spiritual worlds of the biblical authors. The issue was not that of locating ideas on a historical grid or situating religious beliefs on a topographical chart, but of discerning what it meant to "see God" and learning to seek God more zealously. Interpretation was directed not at the text as such, but at the *res*, the reality borne by the text. The enterprise was theological and spiritual and demanded an intellectual account grounded in authentic religious experience. As Christian bishops and theologians expounded the Scriptures the vision of God became one of the great themes of Christian thought and the hearts of the faithful were taught to seek God's face always. "The vision of God is our mind's true refreshment,"<sup>3</sup> wrote Gregory.

The unique vocation of early Christian thought was to provide a unified interpretation of the Scriptures, one that was comprehensive, centered on the triune God, and definitive. This task required more than what is considered interpretation today. For the Bible of the early church was a living voice, not only a document from ancient history. The church fathers were no less aware than we that the books of the Bible came from disparate authors and different historical periods. Yet the Scriptures they sought to understand was a single book, and all its tributaries and rivulets flowed into the great river of God's revelation, the creation of the world, the history of Israel, the life of Christ and the beginning of the church, the final vision of the heavenly city.

Already at the end of the second century in the debate with the Gnostics, Irenaeus showed by a careful exposition of specific passages from the Old Testament, from the epistles of Saint Paul, and from the gospels that the Bible was a book about the one God, creator of heaven and earth, witnessed to by the law and prophets, made known in Christ, and proclaimed in the rule of faith at baptism. Exegesis was theological, and theology was exegetical.

The interpretation of the Scriptures was, however, not primarily a defensive undertaking. It was an effort to understand the Bible as the book of the church in accordance with the church's faith as confessed in the creed. Content, not method, drove interpretation. In the New Testament passages from the psalms and from the prophets were filled with the new reality of Christ. In the first chapter of Hebrews, Psalm 2, "Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee," became a psalm about Christ the Son of God. At the end of the second century Tertullian drew out the implications of the term *word* in Psalm 45:1, "My heart poured forth a good word," and in John 1, to reject a strictly monarchian view of God, and to express the nature of the relation between the Son and the Father. Basil of Caesarea set forth the outlines of a theology of creation on the basis of the words "in the beginning" in Genesis 1. This kind of exegesis did more than explain words and titles; it was a way of thinking, what one might even call *the* Christian way of reasoning, as the church's first thinkers thought through the deepest theological, philosophical, and moral issues with the pages of the Holy Scriptures before them. Whether the subject was the nature of God, the person of Christ, the beginning of the world, or the Christian life, how the topic was approached, formulated, and debated

turned in large measure on the interpretation of specific words and texts from the Scriptures.

Even when the church fathers took up a classical philosophical problem it was treated as a question of the interpretation of the Bible. In the essay on free will in his treatise *First Principles* Origen first states the issues in language drawn from the philosophical tradition, that is, whether moral acts are within our power. But then he reformulates the question by citing a series of biblical texts that introduce a gracious God into the discussion. He quotes the words of Moses in Deuteronomy, "See I have set before you this day life and the way of death. Choose the good and walk in it" (Deut 30:15), and other passages that imply we are free to choose right or wrong. Then he observes that certain passages in the Old and the New Testaments suggest an opposite conclusion. He mentions the story of Pharaoh and God's statement recorded in Exodus, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" (Exod. 4:21) and the words of Paul, it is "not of him that wills nor of him that runs but of God that has mercy" (Romans 9:16). Only after he has systematically considered these and other biblical texts does Origen bring them all together to offer his understanding of human action under the influence of God's grace. For the philosophers freedom of choice was a moral problem, whereas under the influence of the Scriptures it became a theological as well as a moral issue.

Set against the vast horizon of classical thought, Aristotle's treatises on logic and ethics, Plato's dialogues on epistemology and the state, and the urbane political writings of Cicero, the biblicism of early Christian thought seems embarrassingly parochial, a severe narrowing of vision. Discussion always begins with the Scriptures and hence with very particular things, terms,

persons, and events. It was assumed that theological and philosophical matters were to be adjudicated on the basis of the Scriptures. The Bible displaces all other books, and its language, its men and women, its history trump all others. To Celsus, a Greek philosopher, Origen argued that the gospel had a proof proper to itself, one that is "more divine than a Greek proof based on dialectical argument." Christ, a human being who lived in a corner of the world, is the truth.

The particularity and apparent parochialism of Christian thinking did not escape Greek and Roman critics. Julian the Apostate, Roman emperor in the fourth century, and a keen adversary of Christianity, contemptuously entitled his book on the Christians *Against the Galilaeans*. Raised a Christian, Julian knew the title would be a reproach to Christians who claimed that Jesus was the incarnate Son of God, creator of the universe. The term "Galilaeans" not only exposed the barbarian origins of Christianity, but also ridiculed the claim that God was revealed only in Judea and among the Jews. The God worshipped by Jews and Christians, he pointedly observed, is a tribal god, a regional deity who presides over a tiny part of the world, not the god of all. Why should this god be preferred to the gods of the Greeks? Measured against Greek wisdom in the arts, philosophy, and science, the teachings of the Christians are manifestly inferior.

Although Julian exploits the contrast between Athens and Jerusalem for the purpose of exalting the wisdom of Greece and belittling the religion of Christianity (as many others have done since), there is truth to what he says. Christians did claim that the God of all was revealed in a particular place and in a specific person. But it was precisely this particularity that gave Christian thinking its pluck and confidence. The way to truth passes

through the concrete and the personal. The church fathers resolutely followed out the implications of what they had come to know in Christ and in the Scriptures. This they did not because of any loss of nerve or shortening of horizon, but because converse with the living God made known in Judea trained their minds to look at the world and human beings afresh. The very rootedness of biblical revelation drew Christian thinkers more deeply into the truth of things. If the God in whom we live and move and have our being has been known in human flesh, God's face is evident in the things of this world. Turning toward the center was not a retreat from reason, but rather made their thinking bolder and more adventuresome. The first task, then, was to attend to the precious gift that had been received.

The intensity of the light that beamed from Christ, however, did not blind Christians to the wisdom that radiated from Athens. Christians do not speak of the period prior to Christianity the way Muslims speak of the period prior to Islam, as *al-Jahiliyyaha*, "the time of ignorance." Darkness there was, but not deep darkness. Before the rise of Christianity there was in place a well-formed tradition of moral philosophy, and Christian teachers found the cardinal virtues a fitting framework for instructing the faithful in the Christian life. They saw a convergence between the ancient philosophical goal of happiness and the words of Jesus in the beatitudes, "Happy are the meek for they shall inherit the earth," and Psalm 1, "Happy the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly." To be sure, they gradually filled the cardinal virtues with a more biblical content and expanded the list of virtues, but the teleological structure of classical ethics remained intact and was handed on in Christian dress to the medieval world.

In like manner, the early apologists drew on Greek ideas of God to explain and interpret God's otherness and ineffability. They introduced nonbiblical terms, for example, *immutability* and *unoriginate*, to express the biblical view that God is without beginning and eternal. When Saint Augustine read the books of the Neoplatonists, they helped him think his way through to a spiritual understanding of God. Unable to conceive of God except in substantive categories, that is, as something like that which the eye could perceive, he imagined a thin, ethereal substance that was diffused throughout the world. It was taken as self-evident that if something does not occupy space it is nonexistent. By studying the writings of the Neoplatonists he found the conceptual tools to think of God as spiritual, always and everywhere at the same time, "Deus totus ubique simul," as the axiom went.

Most of the major writers in the early church had been trained in the rhetorical schools of the later Roman Empire. They were skilled public speakers and accomplished stylists who could draw on a rich literary tradition. Gregory Nazianzus, the dear friend of Basil of Caesarea, was so wedded to the rhetorical conventions of his day that he wrote only in accepted literary genres, letters, orations, and poems. When the emperor Julian challenged Christians by prohibiting them from teaching in the schools ("Let them go teach Matthew and Luke in the church," said Julian), Gregory reminded him that the Greek language was not the property of the pagans. The intellectual accomplishments of the early church would be much less compelling had Christian bishops not been trained in classical rhetoric and known how to use words effectively, to persuade and to inspire, and, not incidentally, to give pleasure to their readers.

Many factors were at work in the formation of the early Christian intellectual tradition. In ways large and small the church fathers drew on the philosophical, moral, and literary traditions of the ancient world, but the Bible created a new milieu and unloosed their tongues by offering a fresh and versatile vocabulary to express the things they believed. To be sure, the relation between biblical text and *res*, the matter under discussion, was always complex and often subtle (as the debates about the meaning of key scriptural texts make evident), and interpretation required thinking about biblical words like *wisdom* and *word* and passages like "made in the image and likeness of God" on several levels. Terms such as *Father* when applied to God and *Son* to Christ had to be understood in a very abstract sense emptied of their material and bodily implications. In some writings, for example, Gregory of Nyssa's *Against Eunomius*, arguments move on a very sophisticated theological and philosophical plane. Yet the distinctive feature of early Christian thinking was the interplay between biblical text, the spiritual reality discerned in the text, and theological reasoning. The *res* was understood by means of the text, and the *res* in turn interpreted the text.

Of course not everything of significance in the church's life makes an appearance in the early church. For many Christian thinkers today, natural law, particularly as developed by Thomas Aquinas, is an essential tool for contemporary Christian intellectual life. Yet it plays but a small role in the church fathers. There are passages in the Scriptures in which natural law is assumed, Romans 2, for example, and Saint Thomas uses the phrase "eternal law" from Augustine to introduce his discussion of natural law. There are occasions when the church fathers draw on natu-

ral law, most famously in Augustine's treatise *On the Good of Marriage*. The first good, that is, purpose, of marriage is procreation, an argument from natural law that is also found in the writings of Greek and Roman philosophers. Yet Augustine does not present the matter in that way. Instead he cites Genesis 1:28, "Increase and multiply and fill the earth." Natural law is a minor tributary in Christian antiquity.

The intellectual tradition that began in the early church was enriched by the philosophical breadth and exactitude of medieval thought. Each period in Christian history makes its own unique contribution to Christian life. The church fathers, however, set in place a foundation that has proven to be irreplaceable. Their writings are more than a stage in the development of Christian thought or an interesting chapter in the history of the interpretation of the Bible. Like an inexhaustible spring, faithful and true, they irrigate the Christian imagination with the life-giving water flowing from the biblical and spiritual sources of the faith. They are still our teachers today.