

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,