

**CHAPTER ONE**  
**ON THE STEPS OF THE ASCENT INTO GOD AND ON**  
**SEEING GOD THROUGH HIS VESTIGES IN THE WORLD**

1. *Blessed are those whose help comes from you. In their hearts they are prepared to ascend by steps in the valley of tears, in the place which they have set.* Since happiness is nothing other than the enjoyment of the highest good, and since the highest good is above us, no one can become happy without rising above herself: not by a bodily ascent, but by an ascent of the heart. But we cannot rise above ourselves except by means of a superior power lifting us up. For no matter how much one works on ordering these internal steps, nothing will happen without the accompaniment of the divine aid. Divine aid, however, comes to those who ask from their heart humbly and devoutly. This means to sigh for it in this *valley of tears*, which only happens through fervent prayer. Therefore prayer is the mother and the origin of the upward movement of the soul. It is for this reason that pseudo-Dionysius in his book *Mystical Theology* [Bk. 1, ch. 1], wishing to teach us about the ecstasy of the mind, first offers a prayer. Let us, therefore, pray and say to the Lord our God: *Lead me, O Lord, in your way so that I might enter into your truth. Let my heart rejoice that it may be in awe of your name.*

2. When we pray in this manner, the [first] step of the ascent to God is illuminated for our understanding. Now in accordance with our [created] condition, the whole universe of things itself could serve as a ladder, by which we can ascend into God. Further, among those things some are *vestiges*, others are *images*; some are *bodily*, others are *spiritual*; some are *temporal*, others are *everlasting*; and in accordance with this, some are *outside* us, others are *inside* us. Now since what we just said is the case, in order for us to be able to consider that First Principle—which is *most spiritual* and *eternal*, and *above us*—we ought to *move on* through the *vestiges*, which are *bodily* and *temporal* and *outside us*: and this means to *be led in the way of God*. Next we must *enter* into our mind, which is the

*image of God*, an image which is *everlasting, spiritual*, and *inside us*: and this means to *enter into the truth of God*. Finally, we must *pass beyond* to that which is *eternal, most spiritual*, and *above us* by raising our eyes to the First Principle: and this means *to rejoice in the knowledge of God and to stand in awe before God's majesty*.

3. This, therefore, is the three-day journey in the solitude of the desert; this is the triple illumination of a single day: the first is like evening, the second like morning, and the third like noon. This illumination corresponds to the three-fold existence of things, namely in matter, in understanding, and in the eternal Art, in connection with which it is written: *Let it be, God made it*, and *it was made*. This also relates to the triple substance in Christ who is our ladder: namely the corporeal, the spiritual, and the divine.

4. In accordance with this three-fold progression, our soul has three principal ways of relating itself. In one way, the soul is directed towards external corporeal things; under this aspect, the soul is called 'animality' or 'sensation.' In the second way, the soul is directed at itself and within itself; viewed under this aspect, the soul is called 'spirit.' In the third way, the soul looks above itself; under this aspect, it is called 'mind.' Accordingly, one must so dispose oneself towards the ascent to God that he might love God *with the whole mind, the whole heart, and the whole soul*. Those three constitute perfect observance of the Law together with Christian wisdom.

5. Now each of the aforesaid ways may be doubled: insofar as we happen to consider God as the *alpha and the omega*; or insofar as we happen to see God in any of the abovementioned ways as *through* a mirror or as *in* a mirror; or because each of these ways can be considered as mixed, i.e., as conjoined with another, or simply in itself in its purity. For all the aforesaid reasons, it is necessary to increase the number of these principal levels of ascent from three to six, in order that, just as God completed the *entire world* in six days and rested on the

seventh, the “lesser world”<sup>2</sup> might be led to the quiet of contemplation in a most orderly way through six successive levels of illumination. This can be symbolized by the six steps, with which one ascended to the throne of Solomon; by the Seraphs whom Isaiah saw, each of whom had six wings; by the six days, after which the Lord *called Moses from the midst of the cloud*; and by the *six days*, after which, as Matthew writes, *Christ led the disciples to the mountain and was transfigured before them*.

6. Corresponding to the six steps of the *ascent* to God, there are six levels of the *powers* of the soul, by which we ascend from the lowest to the highest, from the external to the internal, and by which we move from the temporal to the eternal. These six levels are: *sense, imagination, reason, understanding, intelligence*, and the *high point of the mind*, or the spark of conscience. These powers are implanted in us by nature. They are deformed through sin and reformed through grace. They must be cleansed through [the exercise of] justice, developed by learning, and perfected by wisdom.

7. According to its original natural constitution, the human being was created with a capacity to experience the quiet of contemplation. Therefore, *God placed the first human being in a paradise of pleasures*. However, turning away from the true light to the changeable good, the first human strayed through his own fault, and the entire human race went sideways on account of original sin, which infected human nature in two ways. It infects the mind with *ignorance*, and the flesh with *concupiscence*. The result is that humans, *blind and wayward*, sit in darkness and do not see the light of heaven, unless grace together with justice aid them against *concupiscence*, and unless knowledge together with wisdom aid them against *ignorance*. All this comes about through Jesus Christ, who by God *has been made wisdom and justice and sanctification and redemption* for us. For since he is the *power* of God and the

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<sup>2</sup> I.e., the “microcosm” of the human mind.

*wisdom of God, and the incarnate Word of God full of grace and truth, he is the source of grace and truth. He pours into us the grace of love, which, since it arises from a pure heart and a good conscience and unfeigned faith, rectifies the entire soul according to the three ways mentioned above. He has taught the knowledge of truth according to three sorts of theology, namely symbolic, proper, and mystical, so that through symbolic theology we might use sensible things correctly, through theology in the proper sense we might deal with intelligible things correctly, and through mystical theology we might be drawn up to ecstatic experiences.*

8. Therefore, a person who wishes to ascend to God must do the following things. The first is avoiding sin, which deforms nature. Next comes sharpening the aforesaid natural powers of the soul in order to receive *reforming grace* (and this is done through prayer); in order to obtain *justice that purifies* (and this is achieved by one's way of life); in order to receive *illuminating knowledge* (and this happens through meditation); and in order to achieve the *wisdom that perfects* (and this is done through contemplation). For just as no one arrives at wisdom except through grace, justice, and knowledge, so no one arrives at *contemplation* except by means of insightful meditation, a holy way of life, and devout prayer. Therefore, just as grace is the foundation of the righteousness of the will and the enlightening clarity of reason, so for us it is necessary first of all to pray. Then we must live in a holy way. And third, we must fix our gaze on the manifestations of truth, and gazing on them, rise gradually, until we arrive at the *high mountain, where the God of gods is seen in Sion.*

9. Now since we must ascend before we can descend on Jacob's ladder, let us place the first step of our ascent at the bottom, putting this whole world perceived by the senses before us as a mirror, through which we may pass to God, the highest creative Artist. In this way we may become true Hebrews, passing from Egypt to the land promised to the forbears. And we shall be Christians passing over with Christ *from this world*

*to the Father. We shall also be lovers of that wisdom, which calls and says: Pass over to me, all you who desire me, and be filled with my fruits. For in the greatness and beauty of created things their Creator can be seen and known.*

10. The supreme power, wisdom, and benevolence of the Creator shines forth in created things; accordingly, the bodily senses make this known to the interior senses in a three-fold way. For the bodily senses aid the intellect when it *investigates rationally*, or *believes faithfully*, or *contemplates intellectually*. When it *contemplates*, the intellect considers the actual existence of things; when it *believes* it considers the habitual flow of events; and when it *investigates by means of reason*, it is concerned with the potential excellence of things.

11. According to the first way, as the intellect *contemplates*, considering things as they are in themselves, it sees them in terms of *weight*, *number*, and *measure*. *Weight* refers to the position toward which they are inclined; *number* refers to that by which things are distinguished; and *measure* is that by which things are limited. Thus we see things in terms of state, form-beauty, and order, and in terms of substance, power, and activity. From observing these aspects, we can rise as from the trace or *vestige* to an understanding of the immense power, wisdom, and goodness of the Creator.

12. According to the second way, as the intellect approaches with *faith* while considering this world, it notices the aspects of *origin*, *development*, and *end*. For it is *by faith* that *we believe that the world was fashioned by the Word of life*. By faith we believe that the periods of the three laws followed each other in a most orderly succession: namely, the law of nature, the law of Scripture, and the law of grace. By faith we believe that the world is to come to an end in the final judgment. Considering the first [i.e., origin], we notice the power of the highest Principle; considering the second [i.e., development], we notice its providence; and considering the third [i.e., the end], we notice its justice.

13. According to the third way, as the intellect *investigates by means of reason*, it sees that some things merely *exist*; others *exist and live*; and yet others *exist, live, and are sentient*. Here it recognizes that the first of these are the less perfect ones; the second are the intermediate ones; and the third are the more perfect ones. Again, it sees that some things are merely *corporeal*; some are *partly corporeal and partly spiritual*; and from this it conjectures that some are *wholly spiritual* and hence are better and of greater dignity than the first two types of beings. It sees also that some things are *changeable and corruptible*, such as earthly things; some are *changeable but incorruptible*, such as heavenly bodies; and from this it conjectures that some are *unchangeable and incorruptible*, such as those things that are beyond heavenly bodies.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, from these visible realities, the intellect learns to see the power, wisdom and goodness of God as existing, living, intelligent, purely spiritual, incorruptible and unchangeable.

14. These observations can be extended if we take into consideration the seven properties of the created world, which offer a seven-fold witness to the power, wisdom, and goodness of God—namely, if we consider the *origin, greatness, multitude, beauty, fullness, activity, and order* of all things.

For the *origin* of things—taking into consideration their creation, distinction, and adornment, which manifested themselves during the work of the six days—proclaims the power of God that produces all things from nothing, the wisdom of God that clearly distinguishes all things, and the goodness of God that richly adorns all things.

The *greatness* of things, if one considers the immensity of their length, width, and depth; or if one considers their immense power, which extends in length, width, and depth, such as the diffusion of light clearly demonstrates; or if one considers the efficiency of their internal, continuous, and diffuse operations, such as the action of fire shows—all this clearly points to the immensity of the power, wisdom, and

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<sup>3</sup> I.e., purely intelligible beings such as angels and God.

goodness of the triune God who, though unlimited, exists in all things by virtue of his *power, presence, and essence*.

The *multitude* of things, if one considers their general, particular, and individual diversity of substance, form or figure, and activity—the diversity that is beyond human estimation—manifestly points to and demonstrates the immense scale, to which the three aforesaid attributes<sup>4</sup> are present in God.

The *beauty* of things, if one considers the diversity of light, shape, and color in bodies that are simple, mixed,<sup>5</sup> or complex<sup>6</sup>—for example, in the heavenly bodies, in minerals (such as stones and metals), and in plants and animals—clearly proclaims the three aforesaid attributes.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, if one considers the fact that *matter* is full of forms on account of the seminal principles;<sup>8</sup> and that form is full of power, i.e., of potential towards actuality; and that this power is full of actual effects, one will see that the *fullness* of things also clearly proclaims the same three attributes.

Likewise, *activity* in its many forms, whether *natural, artistic, or moral*, shows by its extreme variety the immensity of that *power, art, and goodness*,<sup>9</sup> which is for all things “the cause of being, the basis of understanding, and the rule of life.”<sup>10</sup>

As far as *order* is concerned, if one considers it under the aspect of *sequence, position, and status* (i.e., in terms of prior

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<sup>4</sup> I.e., power, wisdom and goodness.

<sup>5</sup> Consisting of more than one element.

<sup>6</sup> Composed of the physical body and some type of a soul: vegetable, animal, or rational.

<sup>7</sup> See note no. 4.

<sup>8</sup> According to ancient Greek thought (this idea was later taken over by Christian thinkers), the primary matter of the world is filled with essential principles of all things that can be potentially generated from this matter. Since not all things that can potentially exist are present in the world at any particular time, these principles are called “seminal”: the seeds that can grow into all possible forms at a certain time.

<sup>9</sup> I.e., those of God.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, Bk. 8, ch. 4.

and posterior, higher and lower, and more or less noble), it clearly shows in the book of creation the *primacy*, *sublimity*, and *dignity* of the First Principle, as far as the infinity of its *power* goes. As for the order of the divine *laws*, *precepts* and *judgments* in the book of the Scriptures, it shows the immensity of God's *wisdom*. Finally, the order of the divine *sacraments*, *graces*, and *rewards* in the body of the church shows the immensity of God's *goodness*. In this way order leads us most manifestly to that which is first and highest, most powerful, most wise, and best.

15. Therefore, any person who is not illumined by such great splendors in created things is blind. Anyone who is not awakened by such great outcries is deaf. Anyone who is not led from all these effects to give praise to God is mute. Anyone who does not notice the First Principle from such conspicuous signs is a fool. Therefore open your eyes, alert your spiritual ears, unlock your lips, and apply your heart so that in all creation you may see, hear, praise, love and adore, extol and honor your God—lest the entire world rise up against you. For it is on this account that *the entire world will fight against the fools*. On the other hand, this will be a cause of glory for the wise who can say in the words of the prophet: *You have given me delight, O Lord, in your deeds, and I shall rejoice in the work of your hands. How wonderful are your works, O Lord. You have made all things in wisdom, the earth is filled with your richness.*