

**CHAPTER FIVE**  
**ABOUT MEDITATING ON GOD'S UNITY BY USING**  
**GOD'S PRIMARY NAME, WHICH IS 'BEING'**

1. Now God can be contemplated not only *outside ourselves* and *inside ourselves* but also *above ourselves*: *outside ourselves* through his vestiges; *inside ourselves* through his image; and *above ourselves* by means of the light that is positioned above our mind. This is the light of the eternal truth itself, since "our mind itself is shaped immediately by truth itself."<sup>49</sup> Those who have become adept at the first way have already entered into the *court* before the tabernacle. Those who are practiced in the second way have entered into the *sanctum*. And those who are skilled in the third way enter together with the High Priest into the *Holy of Holies*, where the Cherubim of glory stand above the ark and overshadow the Mercy Seat. The two Cherubim symbolize the two modes or levels of contemplating the invisible and eternal qualities of God. The first mode concerns the essential attributes of God; the second concerns the properties of the persons.

2. The first approach fixes our gaze primarily and first of all on Being Itself, thus indicating that God's primary name is *He Who Is*. [Exodus 3:14] The second approach fixes our gaze on the Good, thus suggesting that God's primary name is 'the Good.' The first looks above all to the *Old Testament*, which above all proclaims the unity of the divine essence. Hence it was said to Moses: *I am who am*. The second approach looks to the *New Testament*, which establishes the plurality of persons by baptizing *in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*. Therefore Christ, our Master, wishing to raise to evangelical perfection the young man who had observed the Law, attributed to God principally and precisely the name of *Goodness* saying: *No one is good but God alone*. So Damascene, following Moses, says that God's primary name is *He Who Is*,

---

<sup>49</sup> Augustine, 83 *Questions*, qu. 51, ch. 2, n. 4.

while pseudo-Dionysius, following Christ, says that God's primary name is *Good*.<sup>50</sup>

3. Anyone, therefore, who wishes to contemplate the invisible qualities of God that have to do with the *unity of essence* must first of all fix his or her gaze on *Being* Itself. Next, this person must recognize that Being Itself is of itself so *thoroughly certain* that it cannot be thought not to be, for the *purest being* itself only occurs in the total absence of non-being, just as *nothing* is present only in the total absence of *being*. Therefore, just as *total nothingness* possesses nothing of being or of being's attributes, so, on the contrary, Being Itself possesses nothing of *non-being*, neither in actuality nor in a potential state, and neither in reality nor in our mind. Now, since *non-being* is the privation of being, it does not occur to the intellect except by way of [the positive notion of] being. *Being*, on the other hand, does not need anything else in order to occur to the intellect, because everything that is understood is conceptualized either as *non-being*, or as *potential being*, or as *actual being*. But if *non-being* cannot be understood except through *being*, and *potential being* cannot be understood except through *actual being*, and if 'to be' refers precisely to the pure actuality of a being—then it follows that *being* is what first occurs to the intellect, and that this *being* amounts to 'pure actuality.' This, however, cannot be a particular *being*, which is limited because it is mixed with potentiality. Nor is it analogous *being*, which has the least actuality because it has the least of existence. It remains, therefore, that this *being* is the divine Being.

4. How remarkable, then, is the blindness of the intellect, which does not take notice of that which it sees first, and without which it can *know* nothing. It is just like the [physical] eye, which is focused on perceiving different shades of color and fails to see the light, which enables it to see other things; or if it sees it, it pays no attention to it. So it is with the eye of our

---

<sup>50</sup> John Damascene, *On the Orthodox Faith*, Bk. 1, ch. 9; pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, Bk. 3, ch. 1.

mind: it is focused on perceiving *particular* and *universal* beings and pays no attention to *being* itself, which *transcends every genus*—even though it is *being* that first occurs to the mind, and it is through *being* that all other things are known. Hence it rings true that “as the eye of a bat reacts to light, so the eye of our mind reacts to the most evident things of nature.”<sup>51</sup> That is, when the mind, accustomed to the darkness of individual beings and to the images of sensible objects in the imagination, looks directly upon the light of the highest being, it seems to it that it sees nothing: just as when the eye sees pure light it seems to it that it sees nothing. And our mind does not understand that this darkness itself is its highest illumination.

5. Therefore, gaze at the purest *being* itself, if you can, and you will realize that it cannot be thought of as something *received from another*. For this reason it is necessarily thought of as *first* in every sense; but such a thing cannot result from nothing, nor from something else [than itself]. For what else could exist by itself if even *being* itself does not exist through and of itself? Also you will realize that this pure being is *totally lacking in non-being*, and hence that it has never had a beginning nor will ever have an ending, but is *eternal*. Also you will realize that this being *has no attributes whatsoever* except that it is *being* itself; hence it has no composition in itself, but is *most simple*. Also you will realize that this being *has nothing of potentiality* since whatever is potential in some way possesses something of non-being; hence this being is *actual in the highest degree*. Also you will realize that this being *has no defect*, and therefore it is *most perfect*. Finally, you will realize that there is *no diversity* in this being, and therefore it is supremely *one*.

That *being*, therefore, which is being in an unqualified sense, pure, and absolute, is the *first, the eternal, the most simple, the most actual, the most perfect, and the supremely one being*.

---

<sup>51</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Bk. 2.

6. Now these qualities are so certain that no one who understands the meaning of 'being' itself, can imagine the opposites of these qualities [in their place]. Moreover, each one of these qualities necessarily implies the other. For since it is *being* with no qualification, it is thereby *first* in an unqualified sense. Since it is first in an unqualified sense, it is not made by another, nor could it be made by itself; therefore it is *eternal*. And since it is first and eternal, therefore it is not made out of other things, which makes it *supremely simple*. Also, because it is first, eternal, and most simple, therefore there is no potentiality in it that is mixed with actuality; it is therefore *most actual*. Then, because it is first, eternal, most simple, and most actual, it is also *most perfect*. Such a being lacks absolutely nothing, and nothing can be *added* to it. Because it is first, eternal, most simple, most actual, and most perfect, it is *supremely one*. Indeed, when one uses the language of 'super-excess<sup>52</sup> of all sorts,' it can only refer to the 'multitude of all things.' "However, when one uses the language of 'super-excess in an unqualified way' (or 'super-excess simply'), it can only be appropriate for one thing alone."<sup>53</sup> Hence, if the term 'God' stands for the 'primary, eternal, most simple, most actual, and most perfect being,' then it is impossible to think of God as not existing, or to think of God as existing in any other way than as *exclusively one*. Therefore, *Hear, O Israel. The Lord your God is one*. [Deut. 6:4] And if you see this with the pure simplicity of your mind, you will be filled to some extent with the illumination of the eternal light.

7. Here you have something to lift you up in wonder. Indeed, *being* itself is both first and *last*, eternal and *most present*, most simple and *greatest*, most actual and *least changeable*, most perfect and immense, supremely one and *all-embracing*.

---

<sup>52</sup> Bonaventure refers to the superlative degrees used above to describe 'pure being' (most perfect, most actual, etc.). For example, if one says 'primary of all sorts,' this can refer to several things that are primary in various ways. But if one says 'simply primary' or 'primary in an unqualified way,' this can only refer to one thing.

<sup>53</sup> Aristotle, *Topics*, Bk. 5.

If you marvel at these things with a pure mind, you will be filled with an even greater light when you see further that it is *last precisely because* it is first. For since it is first, it does everything for its own sake; therefore, it is of necessity the ultimate end, the beginning and the consummation, the *Alpha* and the *Omega*.

Also, it is *most present* precisely because it is eternal. Indeed, because it is eternal, it does not flow from another, it is not absent from itself, and it does not move from one state to another: therefore, it has neither past nor future, but it exists only in the present.

Also, it is the *greatest* precisely because it is most simple. Indeed, since it is most simple in essence, it is greatest in power, since the more unified or concentrated a power is, the more unlimited it is.

And it is *least changeable* precisely because it is most actual. Indeed, because it is most actual, it is pure actuality. And whatever is such can neither acquire anything new nor lose anything it already possesses; therefore it cannot be changed.

And it is *immense* or immeasurable precisely because it is most perfect. Indeed, because it is most perfect, nothing can be thought of that would be better, more noble, or of greater dignity than it; hence nothing is greater than it; and anything of this sort is immense.

Finally, it is *all-embracing* precisely because it is supremely one. Indeed, that which is supremely one is the universal origin of all multiplicity. By reason of this, it is the universal efficient, exemplary, and final cause of all things, as it is the “cause of existence, the basis of understanding, and the rule of life.” [see p. 10, note 10] Therefore it is *all-embracing* not in the sense of being the essence of all things, but in the sense of being the most excellent, most universal, and most sufficient cause of all essences. And the power of this universal cause, because it is supremely unified in its essence, is thereby supremely infinite and supremely multiple in its effects.

8. Backtracking, let us say as follows: because the most pure and absolute *being* (which is being in an unqualified sense) is *first and last*, it is both the *origin and consummating end* of all things.

Because it is *eternal and most present*, it both exists in and traverses all durations, simultaneously existing, as it were, as both their center and circumference.

Because it is *most simple* and greatest, all of it is both within all things and outside all things, and hence “it is an intelligible sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.”<sup>54</sup>

Because it is *most actual* and *least changeable*, therefore remaining thus unmoved, you movement give to all.<sup>55</sup>

Because it is *most perfect and immense*, it is within all things but is not contained by them; and it is outside all things but is not excluded; it is above all things but not distant; and it is below all things, but not dominated by them.

Because, however, it is both *supremely one and all-embracing*, it is *all in all*, even though all things are multiple and this being is merely one; what allows it to function that way is all that *power*, all *exemplarity*, and all *communicability* in it on account of its most simple *unity*, most peaceful *truth*, and most sincere *goodness*. Hence, *from him and through him and in him are all things*, for he is *all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good*. And to see that perfectly is to be blessed, as it was said to Moses: *I will show you all good*.

---

<sup>54</sup> *The Book of 24 Philosophers*, Part 1, Sentence 2.

<sup>55</sup> Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, Bk. 3, meter 9.