

## QUESTION 12

### How We Know God

Since in what has gone before we have investigated how it stands with God in Himself, we must now investigate how it stands with Him in our cognition, i.e., how God is known by creatures. And on this topic there are thirteen questions: (1) Can any created intellect see God's essence? (2) Does the intellect see God's essence by means of a created species? (3) Can God's essence be seen by a bodily eye? (4) Does any created intellectual substance have enough natural power to see God's essence? (5) In order to see God's essence, does a created intellect stand in need of some created light? (6) Among those who see God's essence, does one see it more perfectly than another? (7) Can any created intellect comprehend God's essence? (8) Does a created intellect that sees God's essence know all things in that essence? (9) Does a created intellect that sees God's essence know by means of likenesses the things that it knows in God's essence? (10) Does a created intellect that sees God's essence know all the things it sees in God simultaneously? (11) Can any man see God's essence in this life? (12) Can we know God through natural reason in this life? (13) In addition to the cognition of natural reason, is there in the present life any cognition of God through grace?

#### Article 1

##### **Can any created intellect see God's essence?**

It seems that no created intellect can see God through His essence:

**Objection 1:** In *Super Ioannem* Chrysostom, in commenting on John 1:18 ("No one has seen God at any time"), says, "Not just the prophets, but even the angels and archangels have not seen Him who is God. For how could that which has a creatable nature see that which is uncreatable?" Likewise, in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 1, Dionysius, in speaking of God, says, "Of Him there is no sensation (*sensus*) or imagination (*phantasia*) or opinion (*opinio*) or definition (*ratio*) or scientific knowledge (*scientia*)."

**Objection 2:** Everything infinite is, as such, unknown. But, as was shown above (q. 7, a. 1), God is infinite. Therefore, God in Himself is unknown.

**Objection 3:** A created intellect has cognition only of things that exist; for the first thing that falls under the intellect's apprehension is *being*. However, according to Dionysius, God is not an existent thing, but instead lies beyond existent things. Therefore, He is not intelligible, but lies beyond all understanding.

**Objection 4:** A knower must have some proportion to what is known, since the thing known is the perfection of the knower (*cognitum sit perfectio cognoscentis*). But a created intellect is not proportioned to God, since they are infinitely distant from one another. Therefore, a created intellect cannot see God's essence.

**But contrary to this:** 1 John 3:2 says, "We shall see Him as He is."

**I respond:** Each thing is knowable to the extent that it has actuality, and so God, who is pure actuality without any admixture of potentiality, is in Himself maximally knowable (*maxime cognoscibilis*). But what is maximally knowable in its own right may not be knowable to some intellect because its intelligibility is too great for that intellect—just as the sun, which is maximally visible, cannot be seen by a bat because its light is too great. Taking note of this fact, some have claimed that no created intellect can see God's essence.

However, it is wrong to say this. For man's ultimate beatitude consists in his highest operation, which is an operation of the intellect, and so if a created intellect can never see God's essence, then either it will never attain beatitude or else its beatitude will lie in something other than God—which is

contrary to the Faith. For the ultimate perfection of a rational creature lies in God, since He is the rational creature's principle of being, and each thing is perfect to the extent that it attains to its own principle.

The claim in question is likewise opposed to reason. For man has a natural desire to know the cause when he perceives an effect; and it is from this desire that wonder originates in men. Therefore, if the rational creature's intellect were unable to attain to the first cause of things, this natural desire would remain unfulfilled.

Hence, one should simply grant that the blessed in heaven see God's essence.

**Reply to objection 1:** Both of these passages are talking about a vision that involves comprehension. Thus, just before the quoted words Dionysius says, "He is incomprehensible to everyone in His totality, and of Him there is no sensation, etc." And Chrysostom, a little after the cited passage, adds, "Here he is speaking of the absolutely certain vision of the Father—as great a contemplation and comprehension as the Father has of the Son."

**Reply to objection 2:** What is unknown in itself is the infinity had by matter that has not been perfected by form; for every type of cognition is through form. By contrast, the infinity had by a form that is not limited by matter is in itself maximally known. But as is clear from what was said above (q. 7., a. 1), it is in the second way, and not the first, that God is infinite.

**Reply to objection 3:** God is said not to be an existent thing, not because He does not in any way exist, but rather because He is above every existing thing insofar as He is His own *esse*. Hence, from this it does not follow that He cannot be known in any way; all that follows is that He exceeds every cognition, i.e., that He is not comprehended.

**Reply to objection 4:** There are two senses of 'proportion':

The first sense is the fixed relation of one quantity to another, and in this sense *double*, *triple*, and *equal* are species of proportion.

In the second sense, any relation of one thing to another is called a proportion. And in this sense a creature can be proportioned to God insofar as it is related to Him as an effect to a cause, or as potentiality to actuality. And this is the sense in which a created intellect can be proportioned to knowing God.

## Article 2

### **Does a created intellect see God's essence by means of some likeness?**

It seems that a created intellect sees God's essence by means of some likeness:

**Objection 1:** 1 John 3:2 says: "We know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, and we shall see Him as He is."

**Objection 2:** In *De Trinitate* 9 Augustine says, "When we know God, some likeness of God comes to exist in us."

**Objection 3:** An act of intellective understanding is the intelligible thing in act (*intellectus in actu est intelligibile in actu*), just as an act of a sensory power is the sensible thing in act. But this is so only insofar as the sensory power is informed by a likeness of the thing that is sensed, and only insofar as the intellect is informed by a likeness of the thing that is understood. Therefore, if God is seen by an act of a created intellect, then He must be seen by means of some likeness.

**But contrary to this:** In *De Trinitate* 15 Augustine says, "When the Apostle says, 'We see now through a mirror and dimly' (1 Corinthians 13:12), by the terms 'mirror' and 'dimly' he can be taken to

be referring to any likenesses that are accommodated to understanding God.” However, seeing God through His essence is not a dim or mirror-like vision, but is instead contrasted with such a vision. Therefore, it is not the case that the divine essence is seen by means of likenesses.

**I respond:** Two things are required for an act of seeing (*ad visionem*), whether it be a sensory act of seeing or an intellective act of seeing, viz., (a) the visual power and (b) the union of the thing seen with the visual power. For there is no act of seeing unless the thing that is seen exists in some way in the one who is seeing.

In the case of corporeal things, it is clear that the thing seen cannot exist *through its essence* in the one who is seeing, but rather can exist in him only *by means of a likeness*. For example, what exists in the eye is not the very substance of a stone, but rather a likeness of the stone by means of which the act of seeing comes to be. However, if one and the same thing were both the principle of the visual power and also the thing that is seen, then the one who sees would have to have from that thing both the visual power and the form by means of which he sees.

Now it is clear that God is the author of the intellective power and is also able to be seen by the intellect.

Since a creature’s *intellective power* is not itself God’s essence, it follows that it is some sort of participated likeness of Him who is the first intellect. This is why a creature’s intellective power is said to be a certain intelligible light—derived, as it were, from the first source of light—regardless of whether this is taken to mean its natural power or some added perfection of grace or glory. Therefore, in order to see God, what is required on the part of the seeing power is some likeness of God by means of which the intellect is capable of seeing God.

However, on the part of the *thing seen*, which must in some way be united to the one who sees, God’s essence cannot be seen by means of any created likeness.

For, first of all, as Dionysius says in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 1, higher things can in no way be cognized by means of likenesses of things of a lower order; for instance, the essence of an incorporeal thing can in no way be known by means of the species of a body. Therefore, *a fortiori*, God’s essence cannot be seen by means of any created species.

Second, as was shown above (q. 3, a. 4), God’s essence is His *esse* itself—something that cannot be true of any created form. Therefore, it is impossible for any created form to be the representing likeness (*similitudo repraesentans*) for one who is seeing God’s essence.

Third, the divine essence is uncircumscribed and eminently contains within itself whatever can be signified or understood by a created intellect. And this can in no way be represented by means of any created species. For every created form is determinate with respect to some nature (*secundum aliquam rationem*), whether *wisdom* or *power* or *esse* itself or something of this sort.

Hence, to claim that God is seen through a likeness is to claim that the divine essence is not seen—which is erroneous.

Therefore, one should say that in order to see God’s essence what is required on the part of the visual power is a certain likeness, viz., *the light of glory*, which empowers the intellect to see God. This is spoken of in Psalm 35:10: “In Your light we shall see light.” However, God’s essence cannot be seen by means of any created likeness that represents God’s essence as it is in itself.

**Reply to objection 1:** This passage is talking about a likeness that exists by participation in the light of glory.

**Reply to objection 2:** Augustine is here talking about the cognition of God that is had in this life.

**Reply to objection 3:** The divine essence is *esse* itself. Hence, just as other intelligible forms that are not their own *esse* are united to the intellect with some *esse* by means of which they inform the intellect itself and make it to be in act, so the divine essence is united to the created intellect as something actually understood and through its very self makes the intellect to be in act.

### Article 3

#### Can God's essence be seen by a bodily eye?

It seems that God's essence can be seen by a bodily eye:

**Objection 1:** Job 19:26 says: "In my flesh I shall see God . . ." And Job 42:5 says: "With the hearing of the ear, I have heard You, but now my eye sees You."

**Objection 2:** In the last book of *De Civitate Dei*, chap. 29, Augustine says, "And so their eyes (*read*: the eyes of those who are glorified) will have a remarkable power of sight—not that they will see more sharply than certain serpents or eagles are reputed to see (for however great the sharpness of vision these creatures are blessed with, they can see nothing other than corporeal things), but rather that they will see even incorporeal things." But anyone who can see incorporeal things can be elevated to see God. Therefore, the glorified eye can see God.

**Objection 3:** God can be seen by a man in an imaginative vision; for Isaiah 6:1 says: "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne . . ." But an imaginative vision has its origins in the senses; for, as *De Anima* 3, chap. 3, says: "The imagination is a movement brought to actuality by the senses." Therefore, God can be seen by a sentient act of vision.

**But contrary to this:** In *De Videndo Deum ad Paulinam* Augustine says: "No one, either in this life or in the life of the angels, has ever seen God as He is in the manner in which visible things are discerned by bodily vision."

**I respond:** It is impossible for God to be seen with the sense of sight or with any other sense or power that belongs to the sentient part [of the soul]. For, as will be explained below (a. 4), every power of this sort is the act of a bodily organ. But an act is proportioned to that of which it is the act. Hence, no power of the sort in question can extend itself beyond corporeal things. But, as was shown above (q. 3, a. 1), God is incorporeal. Therefore, He can be seen neither by the senses nor by the imagination, but only by the intellect.

**Reply to objection 1:** When it is said, "In my flesh I shall see God, my savior," this does not mean that God will be seen with an eye of flesh. Instead, it means that someone who exists in the flesh after the resurrection will see God. Similarly, when it is said, "Now my eye sees You," this refers to the eye of the mind—just as the Apostle says at Ephesians 1:17-18: "May He give to you the spirit of wisdom . . . in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your heart enlightened . . ."

**Reply to objection 2:** In this passage Augustine is speaking in an exploratory and conditional manner. This is clear from the fact that he prefacing the passage with these words: "They [*read*: glorified eyes] will have a far different power, if that incorporeal nature will be seen through them." But shortly afterwards he explains the matter as follows: "It is entirely believable that we will then see the mundane bodies of the new heaven and the new earth in such a way as to see God with utter clarity as present everywhere and governing all those corporeal things—not in the way that the invisible things of God are now seen by understanding the things that have been made, but rather in the way that we now look upon the men with whom we live as they live and exercise the functions of life. We do not *believe* that they are alive; rather, we *see* that they are."

From this it is clear that what he means is that glorified eyes will see God in the way that our eyes now see that someone is alive. But a corporeal eye sees life not as visible *per se*, but rather as sensible *per accidens*. That is, life is not cognized by the senses, but is instead immediately cognized by some other cognitive power in conjunction with the senses.

Now the fact that God's presence will be immediately known by the intellect when corporeal things

are seen depends on two things, viz., the perspicacity of the intellect and the reflection of the divine brightness in the renewed corporeal things.

**Reply to objection 3:** God's essence is not seen in an imaginative vision. Rather, a form that represents God in some manner of likeness is effected in the imagination—just as in the divine Scriptures divine things are described metaphorically through sensible things.

## Article 4

### Can a created intellect see God's essence by its own natural powers?

It seems that a created intellect can see God's essence by its own natural powers:

**Objection 1:** In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, Dionysius says that an angel is a pure and absolutely clear mirror-image (*speculum purum, clarissimum*) that “receives, if one may say so, the full beauty of God.” But a thing is seen when its mirror-image is seen. Therefore, since an angel understands himself by his own natural powers, it seems that he also understands God's essence by his own natural powers.

**Objection 2:** What is maximally visible is less visible to us because of a deficiency in either our bodily vision or our intellectual vision. But an angel's intellect does not suffer from any deficiency. Therefore, since God, taken in Himself, is maximally intelligible, it seems that He is maximally intelligible to an angel. Therefore, if an angel is able by his own natural powers to understand other intelligible things, then *a fortiori* he is able to understand God.

**Objection 3:** The corporeal senses cannot be elevated so as to understand an incorporeal substance, since such a substance lies beyond their nature. Therefore, if seeing God through His essence lies beyond the nature of every created intellect, then it seems that no created intellect can reach the act of seeing God's essence—which, as was made clear above (a. 1), is erroneous. Therefore, it seems that seeing God's essence is natural to a created intellect.

**But contrary to this:** Romans 6:23 says: “The grace of God is eternal life.” But eternal life consists in seeing God's essence, according to John 17:3 (“This is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God”). Therefore, seeing God's essence belongs to a created intellect by grace and not by nature.

**I respond:** It is impossible for any created intellect to see God's essence by its own natural powers. For cognition occurs insofar as what is known exists in the knower. But what is known exists in the knower according to the mode of the knower. Hence, every knower's cognition accords with the mode of its own nature. Therefore, if the thing known is such that its mode of being exceeds the mode of a given knower's nature, then the cognition of that thing must lie beyond the nature of that knower.

Now there are several modes of being found among things (*est multiplex modus essendi rerum*). There are some things whose nature has *esse* only in *this* individual matter. All corporeal things are of this sort. Again, there are some things whose natures subsist *per se* and not in any matter, even though they are not their own *esse*, but are instead things that have *esse*. The incorporeal substances we call angels are of this sort. On the other hand, there is the mode of being peculiar to God alone, insofar as He is His own subsistent *esse*.

Thus, it is connatural for us to know those things that have *esse* only in individual matter. For our soul, through which we have cognition, is the form of a certain matter and has two cognitive powers. One of them is the act of a corporeal organ, and it is connatural to this power to have cognition of things insofar as they exist in individual matter. Thus, the senses have cognition only of singular things. The

second of the soul's cognitive powers is the intellect, which is not the act of any corporeal organ. Hence, through the intellect it is connatural for us to have cognition of natures that have *esse* only in individual matter, yet to have cognition of them not insofar as they exist in individual matter, but rather insofar as they are abstracted from it by the intellect's consideration. Hence, by means of the intellect we are able to know things of this sort in a universal way (*in universalis*)—something that lies beyond the faculty of sense.

On the other hand, it is connatural to an angel's intellect to know natures that do not exist in matter—something that lies beyond the natural power of the intellect had by the human soul in this life, during which the soul is united to the body.

It follows, then, that to know subsistent *esse* itself is connatural only to the divine intellect, and that this lies beyond the natural power of every created intellect. For no creature is its own *esse*; instead, every creature has participated *esse*. Therefore, no created intellect can see God through His essence except insofar as God, through His grace, conjoins Himself to the created intellect as something that can be understood by it (*se intellectui creato coniungit ut intelligibile ab ipso*).

**Reply to objection 1:** The mode of knowing God that is connatural to an angel is to know Him through the likeness of Him that shines forth in the angel himself. But, as was shown above (a. 2), to know God by means of a created likeness is not to know God's essence. Hence, it does not follow that an angel can know God's essence through his natural powers.

**Reply to objection 2:** An angel's intellect has no deficiency, as long as 'deficiency' is taken *privatively*, i.e., as implying that the angel lacks something that he ought to have. On the other hand, if 'deficiency' is taken *negatively*, then every creature is deficient in comparison to God, since no creature has the excellence which is found in God.

**Reply to objection 3:** Since the sense of sight is completely material, it cannot in any way be elevated [so as to understand] anything immaterial. But because the intellect—whether ours or an angel's—is by its nature elevated beyond matter in a certain way, it is capable of being further elevated beyond its nature to something higher through grace.

An indication of this is that the sense of sight cannot in any way know in abstraction that which it knows in the concrete, since it cannot perceive a nature in any way other than as *this* nature. Our intellect, by contrast, can consider in abstraction what it knows in the concrete. For even though it knows things that have forms in matter, it nonetheless resolves the composite thing into the two of them, and it considers the form itself *per se*. Similarly, even though it is connatural to an angelic intellect to know concrete *esse* in some nature, an angel can nonetheless through his intellect isolate the *esse* itself (*potest ipsum esse secernere*), because he knows that he himself is one thing and his own *esse* is something else.

And so since a created intellect can by its nature apprehend a concrete form and concrete *esse* in abstraction through some type of resolution, it can be elevated by grace to know a separated subsistent substance and a separated subsistent *esse*.

## Article 5

### Does a created intellect need some created light in order to see God's essence?

It seems that a created intellect does not need any created light in order to see God's essence:

**Objection 1:** In the case of sensible things, what is luminous in itself does not need any other light in order to be seen; therefore, neither is there such a need in the case of intelligible things. But God is the intelligible source of light. Therefore, He is not seen by means of any created light.

**Objection 2:** When God is seen through a medium, He is not seen through His essence. But when He is seen by means of a created light, He is seen through a medium. Therefore, He is not seen through His essence.

**Objection 3:** If a thing is created, then nothing prevents that thing from being natural to some creature. Therefore, if God's essence is seen by means of a created light, that light will be able to be natural to some creature. And so the creature in question will not need any further light in order to see God—which is impossible. Therefore, it is not necessary that every creature should need some additional light in order to see God's essence.

**But contrary to this:** Psalm 35:10 says: “In Your light we shall see light.”

**I respond:** When anything is elevated to a condition that exceeds its own nature, it has to be disposed by some disposition that lies beyond its nature. For instance, if air is to receive the form of fire, it must be disposed to that form by some disposition.

Now when a created intellect sees God through His essence, God's very essence is the intelligible form of the intellect. Hence, it is necessary for some supernatural disposition to be added to the intellect in order for it to be elevated to such great sublimity. Therefore, since, as has been shown (a. 4), a created intellect's natural power is not sufficient for seeing God's essence, a power of intellective understanding has to be added to it by God's grace. This addition of intellective power is what we call the illumination of the intellect, just as the intelligible thing itself is called light or a source of light. This illumination is the light of which Apocalypse 21:23 says, “The glory of God will illuminate it [read: the society of the blessed who see God].” And by this light the blessed are made godlike, i.e., similar to God—this according to 1 John 3:2: “When He shall appear we shall be like to Him, and we shall see Him as He is.”

**Reply to objection 1:** A created light is necessary for seeing God's essence, but not because God's essence, which is intelligible in itself, becomes intelligible by this light. Rather, the created light is necessary in order for the intellect to become capable of understanding God's essence—in the way that a habit makes a power better able to operate, or again, in the way that corporeal light is necessary for exterior vision insofar as it makes the medium actually transparent, so that it can be moved by color.

**Reply to objection 2:** This light is required for seeing God's essence, not as a likeness in which God is seen, but rather as a certain perfection of the intellect that empowers the intellect to see God. And so one can say that the light is not a medium *in which* God is seen, but rather a medium *subject to which* He is seen. And this sort of medium does not destroy the immediacy of the vision of God.

**Reply to objection 3:** A disposition to the form of fire can be natural only to something that has the form of fire. Hence, the light of glory could not be natural to a creature unless it were a creature with a divine nature—which is impossible. For, as was just claimed, by this light the rational creature becomes godlike.

## Article 6

### **Among those who see God's essence, does one see it more perfectly than another?**

It seems that it is not the case that, among those who see God's essence, one sees it more perfectly than another:

**Objection 1:** 1 John 3:2 says: “We shall see Him as He is.” But He is just one way. Therefore, He will be seen in one way by everyone. Therefore, He will not be seen more and less perfectly.

**Objection 2:** In 83 *Quaestiones* Augustine says that a single entity cannot be understood more by one person than by another. But everyone who sees God through His essence understands the essence of God; for, as was established above (a. 3), God is seen by the intellect and not by the senses. Therefore, it

is not the case that among those who see God's essence, one sees more clearly than another.

**Objection 3:** The fact that one thing is seen more perfectly than another can be traced back to one of two things: either (a) to the visible object or (b) to the seer's visual power.

On the part of the object, this happens because the object is received more perfectly in the one who sees; that is, it happens because of a more perfect likeness. But this does not apply in the present case, since it is not by means of a likeness, but through His essence, that God is present to the intellect of one who sees His essence.

It must be the case, then, that if one person sees Him more perfectly than another does, this is because of a difference in intellective power. And so it follows that the someone whose intellective power is naturally more imposing will see Him more clearly. But this is wrong, since men have been promised equality with the angels in beatitude.

**But contrary to this:** According to John 17:3 ("This is eternal life . . ."), eternal life consists in seeing God. Therefore, if everyone sees God's essence equally, then in eternal life everyone will be equal. But the Apostle says just the opposite of this in 1 Corinthians 15:41: "Star differs from star in glory."

**I respond:** Among those who see God through His essence, one will see Him more perfectly than another. To be sure, this will not be because there is a more perfect likeness of God in the one than in the other, since, as has been shown (a. 2), this vision will not occur by means of any likeness. Rather, it will be because the intellect of the one has a greater power or capacity to see God than the intellect of the other does.

Now the capacity to see God belongs to a created intellect not by its nature, but rather through the light of glory, which, as is clear from what was said above (a. 5), gives the intellect a certain godlikeness. Hence, an intellect that has a greater share in the light of glory will see God more perfectly. But the one who will have a greater share in the light of glory is the one who has greater charity. For where there is greater charity, there is greater desire, and it is the desire that in some sense makes the one who desires disposed and prepared to receive that which is desired. Hence, it is the one who has greater charity who will see God more perfectly and be more beatified.

**Reply to objection 1:** When it is said that we shall see Him as He is, the particle 'as' determines the mode of the act of seeing on the part of the thing that is seen, so that the sense of the phrase is this: "We shall see Him to be such as He is." For we will see His very *esse*, which is His essence.

However, 'as' does not determine the mode of the act of seeing on the part of the one who is seeing, as if this were the sense of the phrase: "The mode of seeing will be as perfect as God's mode of being is."

**Reply to objection 2:** The answer to this objection is clear from what has just been said. For when it is claimed that a single entity cannot be more understood by one person than by another, this is true if it is referring to the mode of the *thing that is understood*. For if anyone understands a thing to be otherwise than it is, he does not truly understand it. However, the claim is not true if it is referring to the mode of the *act of understanding*. For one person's act of intellective understanding is more perfect than another's act of intellective understanding.

**Reply to objection 3:** The differences in seeing will not stem from the object, since the same object, viz., God's essence, will be presented to everyone. Nor will the differences stem from diverse likenesses leading to different degrees of participation in the object. Rather, they will stem from diverse capacities on the part of the intellects—not diverse natural capacities, but diverse glorified capacities, as has been explained.

## Article 7

### **Do those who see God through His essence comprehend Him?**

It seems that those who see God through His essence comprehend Him:

**Objection 1:** In Philippians 3:12 the Apostle says: “I follow after, if I may in any way comprehend.” But he did not follow in vain; for as he himself says in 1 Corinthians 9:26, “I therefore so run, not as at an uncertainty.” Therefore, he comprehended, and so, too, the others whom he invites to do the same, saying: “So run that you may comprehend.”

**Objection 2:** As Augustine says in *De Videndo Deum ad Paulinam*, “Something is comprehended when it is seen as a whole in such a way that nothing of it lies hidden from the seer.” But if God is seen through His essence, then He is seen as a whole and nothing of Him lies hidden from the seer; for God is simple. Therefore, He is comprehended by anyone who sees Him through His essence.

**Objection 3:** Someone might reply that He is seen as a whole, but not totally.

Against this: ‘Totally’ expresses either a mode of the seer or a mode of the thing seen. But one who sees God through His essence sees him totally, if ‘totally’ signifies a mode of the thing seen. For, as was noted above (a. 6), he sees Him as He is. Similarly, he sees Him totally, if ‘totally’ signifies a mode of the seer. For the intellect will see God’s essence with all its might. Therefore, anyone who sees God through His essence will see Him totally. Therefore, he will comprehend Him.

**But contrary to this:** Jeremiah 32:18-19 says: “O most mighty, great, and powerful, the Lord of hosts is Your name. Great in counsel, and incomprehensible in thought.” Therefore, He cannot be comprehended.

**I respond:** Comprehending God is impossible for any created intellect, “but to attain to God with the mind in any way is great beatitude,” as Augustine says.

To see this clearly, note that something is comprehended when it is known perfectly, and something is known perfectly when it is known to the full extent that it is knowable. Hence, if something that is knowable through demonstrative scientific knowledge (*cognoscibile per scientiam demonstrativam*) is held by mere opinion (*opinio*) stemming from a probable argument, then it is not comprehended. For instance, if someone knows through a demonstration that a triangle has three angles equal to two right angles, then he comprehends this. By contrast, if someone accepts this proposition as a probable opinion because it is asserted by many people or by the wise, then he does not comprehend it, since he has not reached that perfect mode of cognition by which the proposition is knowable.

Now no created intellect can reach the perfect mode of cognition by which God’s essence is knowable. This is clear as follows: Each thing is knowable to the extent that it is a being in actuality. Therefore, God, whose *esse*, as was shown above (q. 7, a. 1), is infinite, is infinitely knowable. But no created intellect can know God in an infinite way. For a created intellect knows the divine essence more or less perfectly to the extent that it is imbued with a greater or lesser light of glory. Therefore, since the created light of glory received in a created intellect cannot be infinite, it is impossible for any created intellect to know God in an infinite way. Hence, it is impossible for it to comprehend God.

**Reply to objection 1:** ‘Comprehension’ has two senses.

In the first sense, the strict and proper one, something is enclosed within the comprehending thing. Given this sense, there is no way in which God is comprehended, whether by an intellect or anything else. For since He is infinite, He cannot be enclosed in anything finite in the sense that something finite should grasp Him in an infinite way that corresponds to the infinite way in which He exists. And this is the sense of ‘comprehension’ that we are asking about here.

In a second sense, ‘comprehension’ is taken more broadly in such a way that comprehending is opposed to simply pursuing. For whoever catches up with someone is said to comprehend him when

once he grabs hold of him. In this sense God is comprehended by the blessed in heaven, according to Canticles 3:4 ("I held him, and I will not let him go."). And this is how to interpret the passages from the Apostle that have to do with comprehension.

In this sense, comprehension is one of the three 'gifts of the soul', and it corresponds to hope, just as the act of seeing corresponds to faith and act of enjoying corresponds to charity. For us it is not the case that everything that is seen is already had or possessed, since we sometimes see things that are distant or things that are not within our power. Again, we do not enjoy all the things that we have, either because we do not delight in them or because they are not the ultimate end of our desire in the sense of fulfilling and quieting our desire. But the blessed in heaven have these three gifts in God. For they see Him; and seeing Him, they hold Him present, having it within their power to see Him always; and holding on to Him, they enjoy Him as the ultimate end that fulfills their desire.

**Reply to objection 2:** God is said to be incomprehensible not because there is something of Him that is not seen, but because He is not seen in as perfect a way as He is visible. Similarly, when a demonstrable proposition is known [only] through some probable argument, it is not the case that there is something of it—say, a subject or predicate or the composition of the two—that is not known. Rather, the whole is not known in as perfect a way as it is knowable. Hence, Augustine, in defining comprehension, says, "A whole is comprehended by sight when it is seen in such a way that nothing of it lies hidden from the seer or in such a way that its limits can be surveyed." For the limits of a thing are surveyed when one reaches the limit in the way that thing is known.

**Reply to objection 3:** 'Totally' expresses a mode of the object—not, to be sure, in the sense that the whole mode of the object does not fall under our cognition, but rather in the sense that the mode of the object is not the mode of the knower. Therefore, one who sees God through His essence sees in Him that He exists in an infinite way and is knowable in an infinite way, but he also sees that this infinite way does not belong to him in the sense that he himself knows God in an infinite way. Similarly, someone can have probable knowledge that a given proposition is demonstrable, even if he himself does not know it demonstratively.

## Article 8

### **Do those who see God through His essence see all things in God?**

It seems that those who see God through His essence see all things in God:

**Objection 1:** In *Dialogorum Libri 4* Gregory asks, "What is there they do not see who see the one who sees all things?" But God is the one who sees all things. Therefore, those who see God see all things.

**Objection 2:** Anyone who sees a mirror sees the things that are reflected in the mirror. But everything that has been made or can be made is reflected in God as in a mirror; for He knows all things in Himself. Therefore, whoever sees God sees all the things that exist and all the things that can be made.

**Objection 3:** As *De Anima 3* says, someone who understands that which is greater can understand the things that are least. But all the things that God effects or can effect are less than His essence. Therefore, whoever understands God is able to understand all the things that God effects or can effect.

**Objection 4:** A rational creature desires by nature to know all things. Therefore, if he does not know all things in seeing God, his natural desire will not be quieted, and in seeing God he will not be beatified—which is absurd. Therefore, in seeing God he knows all things.

**But contrary to this:** The angels see God through His essence and yet do not know all things. For

as Dionysius says in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 7, the lower angels are cleansed of their ignorance by the higher angels. Moreover, even the higher angels themselves do not know future contingents or the inmost thoughts of hearts, since this belongs to God alone. Therefore, it is not the case that whoever sees God's essence sees all things.

**I respond:** A created intellect, in seeing God's essence, does not see in it all the things that God effects or can effect. For it is clear that some things are seen in God insofar as they exist in Him. But all the other things exist in Him in the way that effects exist virtually in their cause. Therefore, these other things are seen in God in the way that effects are seen in their cause.

But it is clear that the more perfectly a cause is seen, the more of its effects can be seen in it. For instance, someone with high intelligence is such that, once a demonstrative principle has been proposed, he immediately recognizes many of the conclusions that follow from it. This does not happen with someone of lesser intelligence; instead, the conclusions have to be explained to him one by one. Therefore, it is the intellect that totally comprehends a cause that is able know in the cause all of its effects and all the aspects of its effects.

However, as has been shown (a. 7), no created intellect can totally comprehend God. Therefore, no created intellect, in seeing God, can know all the things that God effects or can effect—for this would be to comprehend His power. Rather, an intellect knows more of the things that God effects or can effect to the extent that it sees God more perfectly.

**Reply to objection 1:** Gregory is speaking about the sufficiency of the object, viz., God, and claiming that, taken in Himself, He sufficiently contains and manifests all things. However, it does not follow that one who sees God knows all things; for he does not perfectly comprehend Him.

**Reply to objection 2:** One who looks in a mirror does not necessarily see all the things in the mirror unless he comprehends the mirror by his vision.

**Reply to objection 3:** Even though it is greater to see God than to see all other things, nonetheless, it is greater to see God in such a way that all things are known in Him than to see Him in such a way that not all things, but just more or fewer things, are known in Him. For it has already been shown that the number of things known in God depends on whether one's mode of seeing Him is more perfect or less perfect.

**Reply to objection 4:** A rational creature has a natural desire to know all those things that pertain to the perfection of the intellect. These include the species and genera of things and their natures. Everyone who sees the divine essence will see all these things in God.

However, it is not part of a created intellect's perfection to know other singular things and their thoughts and deeds. The intellect's natural desire does not tend toward this; nor, again, does it tend toward knowing things that do not yet exist but can be effected by God.

Still, if a created intellect were to see just God, who is the font and principle of all being and truth, He would satisfy its natural desire for knowing in such a way that nothing else would be sought, and the intellect would be beatified. This is why Augustine says in *Confessiones* 5, "A man is unhappy if he knows all those things [read: creatures] but does not know You, whereas he is happy if he knows You, even if he does not know those things. And even if he knows You and those things, he is not happier because of them, but is happy solely because of You."

## Article 9

### Do those who see God's essence see the things they see in God by means of likenesses?

It seems that those who see God's essence see the things they see in God by means of likenesses:

**Objection 1:** Every cognition takes place through the assimilation of the knower to what is known. For in this way the act of the intellect becomes the actuality of what is understood. And the act of the senses becomes the actuality of what is sensed insofar as the senses are informed by a likeness of that thing, in the way that the pupil is informed by a likeness of color. Therefore, if the intellect of one who sees God through His essence is to understand creatures in God, it has to be informed by likenesses of those creatures.

**Objection 2:** We hold in memory things that we have previously seen. But as Augustine points out in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 12, Paul, who saw God's essence in a rapture, remembered, after he ceased to see God's essence, many of the things he had seen in that rapture. Thus, in 2 Corinthians 12:4 he says that he "heard secret words which it is not granted to man to utter." Therefore, one has to concede that certain likenesses of the things he remembered had remained in his intellect. And, for the same reason, while he was actually seeing God's essence, he had likenesses or species of the things that he saw in that essence.

**But contrary to this:** A mirror and the things that appear in the mirror are seen by means of a single species. But all things are seen in God as in a kind of intelligible mirror. Therefore, if God Himself is seen through His essence and not by means of a likeness, then the things that are seen in Him are likewise not seen by means of any likenesses or species.

**I respond:** Those who see God through His essence do not see the things they see in God's essence by means of any species. Rather, they see those things through the divine essence itself united to their intellect.

Each thing is known insofar as its likeness exists in the knower. But this can happen in one of two ways; for since things that are similar to one and the same thing are similar to each other, there are two ways in which a cognitive power can be assimilated to a given knowable thing. In the first way, it is assimilated to the knowable thing in its own right when it is directly informed by a likeness of that thing, and in such a case the thing is known in itself. In the second way, it is assimilated to the knowable thing insofar as it is informed by a species of something that is similar to that thing, and in such a case the thing is not said to be known in its very self, but is instead said to be known in what is similar to it. For instance, a cognition by which some man is known in himself is different from a cognition by which he is known in a picture of him.

So, then, to know things through likenesses of them that exist in the knower is to know them in themselves, i.e., in their proper natures. But to know them insofar as their likenesses preexist in God is to see them in God. And these two cognitions differ from one another.

Hence, in the sort of cognition by which things are known in God Himself by those who see God through His essence, those things are not seen by means of any other likenesses. Rather, they are seen through the divine essence itself insofar as it is present to the intellect, and it is through this essence that God is likewise seen.

**Reply to objection 1:** The intellect of one who sees God is assimilated to the things that are seen in God insofar as it is united to God's essence, in which likenesses of all things preexist.

**Reply to objection 2:** There are some cognitive powers that can form new species from species that have already been first conceived. For example, from the previously conceived species of a mountain and of gold, the imagination can form the species of a golden mountain; and from the previously conceived species of a genus and a difference, the intellect can form the definition of a species. Similarly, from the likeness of a picture we are able to form within us a likeness of the thing whose picture it is.

Thus, Paul (or anyone else who sees God) can, on the basis of the very vision of God's essence, form within himself likenesses of the things that are seen in the divine essence. And these likenesses remained in Paul even after he had ceased to see God's essence. Still, the vision by which things are

seen by means of species conceived in this way is different from the vision by which things are seen in God.

### Article 10

#### **Do those who see God through His essence see all the things they see in Him simultaneously?**

It seems that those who see God through His essence do not see all the things they see in Him simultaneously:

**Objection 1:** According to the Philosopher, it is possible to know (*scire*) many things, but to have an occurrent act of intellective understanding (*intelligere*) with respect to just one thing [at a time]. But the things which are seen in God are understood, since it is by intellective understanding (*intellectus*) that God is seen. Therefore, it is not possible for those who see God to see many things in God all at once.

**Objection 2:** In *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 8 Augustine says, “God moves the spiritual creature through time,” that is, He moves the spiritual creature through acts of intellective understanding and affection. But an angel is a spiritual creature who sees God. Therefore, those who see God have acts of understanding and affection one after another; for time implies succession.

**But contrary to this:** In the last book of *De Trinitate* Augustine says, “Our cognitions will not be changeable, going and returning from one to another. Instead, we will see all our knowledge at once in a single vision.”

**I respond:** The things that are seen in the Word will be seen all at once and not successively.

To see this clearly, note that the reason why we cannot understand many things all at once is that we understand the many things by means of different species. And a single intellect cannot be actually informed by many species all at once in such a way as to understand by means of them—just as a single body cannot be configured by different shapes simultaneously.

Hence, it happens that when some multitude of things can be understood by means of a single species, they are understood all at once. Take, for example, the different parts of a given whole. If each part is understood by means of its own proper species, then the parts are understood successively and not simultaneously, whereas if they are all understood by means of the single species of the whole, then they are understood simultaneously.

Now it has been shown (a. 9) that the things which are seen in God are not seen one by one by means of their own likenesses. Rather, they are seen through the single essence of God. Therefore, they are seen all at once and not successively.

**Reply to objection 1:** We understand just one thing in the sense that we understand it by means of a single species. But when many things are understood by means of a single species, they are understood simultaneously. For instance, in the species *man* we understand *animal* and *rational*, and in the species *house* we understand *wall* and *roof*.

**Reply to objection 2:** As regards the natural cognition by which angels know things through the different species infused in them, they do not know them all simultaneously, and this is the sense in which they are moved through time with respect to intellective understanding. But insofar as they see things in God, they see them all at once.

## Article 11

### **Is it possible for someone to see God's essence in this life?**

It seems possible for someone to see God's essence in this life:

**Objection 1:** In Genesis 32:30 Jacob says, "I have seen God face to face." But to see God face to face is to see God through His essence—as is clear from 1 Corinthians 13:12 ("We see now through a glass and dimly, but then face to face"). Therefore, God can be seen through His essence in this life.

**Objection 2:** In Numbers 12:8 the Lord says of Moses: "I speak to him mouth to mouth and plainly, and not by riddles and figures does he see God." But this is to see God through His essence. Therefore, it is possible for someone in this life to see God through His essence.

**Objection 3:** That in which we know all things and that by which we judge other things is known to us in itself.

But even now we know all things in God. For in *Confessiones* 12 Augustine says, "If both of us see that what you say is true, and if both of us see that what I say is true, then where, I ask, do we see this? I do not see it in you, nor do you see it in me, but rather both of us see it in that unchangeable truth which lies beyond our minds."

Likewise, in *De Vera Religione* Augustine says that we judge all things by God's truth. And in *De Trinitate* 12 he says, "It belongs to reason to judge these corporeal things by incorporeal and eternal standards, which would not be really unchangeable if they did not lie beyond our minds."

Therefore, even in this life we see God Himself.

**Objection 4:** According to Augustine in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 12, the things which exist in the soul through their essence are seen by an intellectual vision. But, as he says in the same place, it is through their essences, and not through likenesses, that intelligible things are seen in an intellectual vision. Therefore, since God exists through His essence in our soul, He is seen by us through His essence.

**But contrary to this:** Exodus 33:20 says, "Man shall not see me and live." A Gloss adds: "As long as one is in this mortal life, God can be seen through certain images, but He cannot be seen through the very likeness of His nature."

**I respond:** A mere man cannot see God through His essence unless he is cut off from this mortal life. The reason is that, as was explained above (a. 4), the mode of cognition is consequent upon the mode of the nature of the thing that knows. But as long as our soul is living in this life, it has *esse* in a material body, and thus it does not naturally know things unless they have a form in matter or can be known through things of this sort. But it is clear that God's essence cannot be known through the natures of material things. For it was shown above (a. 2) that a cognition of God by means of any sort of created likeness is not a vision of His essence. Hence, it is impossible for the soul of a man living in this life to see God's essence.

One indication of this is that the more our soul is abstracted from matter, the more fit it becomes for abstract intelligibles. Hence, it is in dreams and withdrawals from the bodily senses that divine revelations and precognitions of the future are perceived. Therefore, the elevation of the soul to the highest intelligible thing, viz., God's essence, cannot occur as long as the soul partakes of this mortal life.

**Reply to objection 1:** According to Dionysius in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 4, the Scriptures say that someone has seen God in the sense that sensible or imaginary figures representing something divine are fashioned according to a certain likeness. Therefore, Jacob's statement, "I have seen God face to face," should be interpreted as referring not to God's essence itself, but to a figure in which God was represented. As will become clear below when we discuss the degrees of prophecy (*ST* 2-2, q. 174, a. 3), it is itself indicative of a certain high degree of prophecy that the personage of God should be seen

speaking, even if in an imaginary vision.

An alternative reply is that Jacob is saying this in order to signify a certain high level of intelligible contemplation, beyond the normal degree.

**Reply to objection 2:** Just as God does something miraculous supernaturally in the case of corporeal things, so too he has likewise elevated—supernaturally and beyond the common order—the minds of certain people living in the flesh (but not using their bodily senses) all the way up to the vision of His essence. This is what Augustine says in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 12 and in *De Videndo Deum* about Moses, who was the teacher of the Jews, and about Paul, who was the teacher of the gentiles. More will be said about this when we talk about rapture (*ST* 2-2, q. 175, a. 3).

**Reply to objection 3:** We are said to see all things in God and to judge all things by Him insofar as we know and judge all things through a participation in His light, since the natural light of reason is itself a certain participation in the divine light. And this is like the way in which we are said to see and judge all sensible things in the sun, i.e., by the light of the sun. Hence, in *Soliloquia* 1 Augustine says, “Proofs in the academic disciplines cannot be seen unless they are, as it were, illuminated by a sun of their own, viz., God.” Therefore, just as it is not necessary to see the substance of the sun in order to see something sensibly, so, too, it is not necessary to see God’s essence in order to see something intelligibly.

**Reply to objection 4:** Intellectual vision is had of those things which exist in the soul through their essence in the way that intelligible things exist in the intellect. This is the way in which God exists in the soul of the blessed in heaven, but not in our soul. Rather, He exists in our soul by His presence, essence, and power (q. 8, a. 3).

## Article 12

### **Can we know God in this life through natural reason?**

It seems that we cannot know God in this life through natural reason:

**Objection 1:** In *De Consolatione Philosophiae* Boethius says, “Reason does not grasp a simple form.” But as was shown above (q. 3, a. 7), God is a maximally simple form. Therefore, natural reason cannot attain to a cognition of Him.

**Objection 2:** As *De Anima* 3 says, without images the soul does not understand anything through natural reason. But there cannot exist in us a phantasm with respect to God, since He is incorporeal. Therefore, He cannot be known by us through a natural cognition.

**Objection 3:** Cognition through natural reason is common to both good men and bad men, just as [human] nature is common to them both. But a cognition of God belongs only to those who are good; for as Augustine says in *De Trinitate* 1, “The human mind’s acuteness is not fixed in such an excellent light unless it is cleansed by the righteousness of faith.” Therefore, God cannot be known through natural reason.

**But contrary to this:** Romans 1:19 says, “That which is known about God is manifest in them,” i.e., that which can be known about God through natural reason.

**I respond:** Our natural cognition takes its origin from the senses, and so our natural cognition can extend only as far as it can be led by sensible things. But from sensible things our intellect cannot reach the vision of God’s essence, since sensible creatures are effects of God’s that are not equal to the power of their cause. Therefore, on the basis of the cognition of sensible things we cannot know the whole power of God nor, as a result, see His essence.

However, since His effects are dependent upon their cause, we can be led by those effects to know of Him whether He exists, and to know of Him what must belong to Him as the first cause of all things,

exceeding all the things He causes. Hence, we know His relationship to creatures, viz., that He is a cause of all of them; and we know how creatures differ from Him, viz., that He is not any of the things that are caused by Him; and we know that these things are denied of Him not because of any defect on His part, but rather because He exceeds the things He causes.

**Reply to objection 1:** Reason cannot attain to a simple form in such a way as to know of it what it is (*quid est*), but it can have a cognition of it such that it knows whether it exists.

**Reply to objection 2:** God is known through natural reason by means of phantasms of His effects.

**Reply to objection 3:** Since the cognition of God through His essence occurs by means of grace, it belongs only to those who are good. But the cognition of Him that occurs through natural reason can belong both to the good and to the bad. This is why, in *Retractationes*, Augustine says, “I do not approve of something I once said in a prayer, viz., ‘O God, who wills that only the clean should know the truth’, since one can reply that many who are not clean also know many truths”—viz., through natural reason.

### Article 13

#### Is a deeper cognition of God had through grace than is had through natural reason?

It seems that it is not the case that a deeper cognition of God is had through grace than is had through natural reason:

**Objection 1:** In *De Mystica Theologia* Dionysius says that the one who is more closely united to God in this life is united to Him as to something altogether unknown; he says this even of Moses, who had a certain excellence in the cognition effected by grace. But it is likewise possible through natural reason to be conjoined to God while not knowing His real definition (*quid est*). Therefore, God is not better known to us through grace than He is through natural reason.

**Objection 2:** One cannot reach the cognition of divine things through natural reason except by means of phantasms. But the same thing also holds for the cognition of divine things had through grace; for in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 1, Dionysius says, “It is impossible for the divine ray to illumine us unless it is enshrouded by a variety of sacred veils.” Therefore, we do not know God more fully through grace than through natural reason.

**Objection 3:** Our intellect adheres to God through the grace of faith. But faith does not seem to be a kind of cognition; for in *Homilia* Gregory says that there is faith (*fides*) and not cognition (*agnitio*) for those things that are not seen. Therefore, grace does not give us a more excellent cognition of God.

**But contrary to this:** In 1 Corinthians 2:10 the Apostle says, “To us God has revealed them by His Spirit,” viz., those things which “none of the princes of this world knew,” i.e., those things which, as a Gloss explains, none of the philosophers knew.

**I respond:** Through grace we have a more perfect cognition of God than we do through natural reason. This is clear from the following:

The cognition we have through natural reason requires two things, viz., (a) images taken from sensible things and (b) a natural intelligible light by virtue of which we abstract intelligible conceptions from them. And with respect to both of these, human cognition is aided by the revelation of grace.

For the natural light of the intellect is strengthened through the infusion of the light of grace. And as is clear in the case of prophetic visions, sometimes even the phantasms in a man’s imagination are divinely fashioned in order to better express divine matters than do the images that we naturally receive from sensible things. Again, sometimes sensible things, or even voices, are divinely fashioned to express something divine. For instance, at the [Lord’s] baptism the Holy Spirit was seen in the likeness of a dove and the voice of the Father was heard saying, “This is my beloved Son.”

**Reply to objection 1:** Through the revelation of grace in this life we do not know the real definition (*quid est*) of God and so are conjoined to Him as, so to speak, something unknown. Still, we know Him more fully because (a) more of His effects, and more excellent effects, are shown to us and because (b) on the basis of divine revelation we attribute to Him certain things that natural reason does not attain to, e.g., that God is both three and one.

**Reply to objection 2:** On the basis of phantasms—either phantasms received from the senses according to the natural order or phantasms divinely fashioned in the imagination—a more excellent intellective cognition is had to the extent that the intelligible light in a man is made stronger. And so through revelation a fuller cognition is received from the phantasms because of the infusion of divine light.

**Reply to objection 3:** Faith is a kind of cognition insofar as the intellect is determined through faith to something knowable. But this determination to one thing proceeds not from an act of seeing on the part of the believer (*non ex visione credentis*) but rather from an act of seeing on the part of the one who is believed. And so, insofar as there is no act of seeing (*in quantum deest visio*), faith falls short of the type of cognition that is found in scientific knowledge (*scientia*). For scientific knowledge determines the intellect to one thing through an act of seeing and understanding first principles.