

Confessions - Book V - Chapter X

by St. Augustine

Transcript

18. Thou didst restore me then from that illness, and didst heal the son of thy handmaid in his body, that he might live for thee and that thou mightest endow him with a better and more certain health. After this, at Rome, I again joined those deluding and deluded \"saints\"; and not their \"hearers\" only, such as the man was in whose house I had fallen sick, but also with those whom they called \"the elect.\" For it still seemed to me \"that it is not we who sin, but some other nature sinned in us.\" And it gratified my pride to be beyond blame, and when I did anything wrong not to have to confess that I had done wrong--\"that thou mightest heal my soul because it had sinned against thee\"[141]--and I loved to excuse my soul and to accuse something else inside me (I knew not what) but which was not I. But, assuredly, it was I, and it was my impiety that had divided me against myself. That sin then was all the more incurable because I did not deem myself a sinner. It was an execrable iniquity, O God Omnipotent, that I would have preferred to have thee defeated in me, to my destruction, than to be defeated by thee to my salvation. Not yet, therefore, hadst thou set a watch upon my mouth and a door around my lips that my heart might not incline to evil speech, to make excuse for sin with men that work iniquity.[142] And, therefore, I continued still in the company of their \"elect.\"

19. But now, hopeless of gaining any profit from that false doctrine, I began to hold more loosely and negligently even to those points which I had decided to rest content with, if I could find nothing better. I was now half inclined to believe that those philosophers whom they call \"The Academics\"[143] were wiser than the rest in holding that we ought to doubt everything, and in maintaining that man does not have the power of comprehending any certain truth, for, although I had not yet understood their meaning, I was fully persuaded that they thought just as they are commonly reputed to do. And I did not fail openly to dissuade my host from his confidence which I observed that he had in those fictions of which the works of Mani are full. For all this, I was still on terms of more intimate friendship with these people than with others who were not of their heresy. I did not indeed defend it with my former ardor; but my familiarity with that group--and there were many of them concealed in Rome at that time[144]--made me slower to seek any other way. This was particularly easy since I had no hope of finding in thy Church the truth from which they had turned me aside, O Lord of heaven and earth, Creator of all things visible and invisible. And it still seemed to me most unseemly to believe that thou couldst have the form of human flesh and be bounded by the bodily shape of our limbs. And when I desired to meditate on my God, I did not know what to think of but a huge extended body--for what did not have bodily extension did not seem to me to exist--and this was the greatest and almost the sole cause of my unavoidable errors.

20. And thus I also believed that evil was a similar kind of substance, and that it had its own hideous and deformed extended body--either in a dense form which they called the earth or in a thin and subtle form as, for example, the substance of the air, which they imagined as some malignant spirit penetrating that earth. And because my piety--such as it was--still compelled me to believe that the good God never created any evil substance, I formed the idea of two masses, one opposed to the other, both infinite but with the evil more contracted and the good more expansive. And from this diseased beginning, the other sacrileges followed after.

For when my mind tried to turn back to the Catholic faith, I was cast down, since the Catholic faith was not what I judged it to be. And it seemed to me a greater piety to regard thee, my God--to whom I make confession of thy mercies--as infinite in all respects save that one: where the extended mass of evil stood opposed to thee, where I was compelled to confess that thou art finite--than if I should think that thou couldst be confined by the form of a human body on every side. And it seemed better to me to believe that no evil had been created by thee--for in my ignorance evil appeared not only to be some kind of substance but a corporeal one at that. This was because I had, thus far, no conception of mind, except as a subtle body diffused throughout local spaces. This seemed better than to believe that anything could emanate from thee which had the character that I considered evil to be in its nature. And I believed that our Saviour himself also--thy Only Begotten--had been brought forth, as it were, for our salvation out of the mass of thy bright shining substance. So that I could believe nothing about him except what I was able to harmonize with these vain imaginations. I thought, therefore, that such a nature could not be born of the Virgin Mary without being mingled with the flesh, and I could not see how the divine substance, as I had conceived it, could be mingled thus without being contaminated. I was afraid, therefore, to believe that he had been born in the flesh, lest I should also be compelled to believe that he had been contaminated by the flesh. Now will thy spiritual ones smile blandly and lovingly at me if they read these confessions. Yet such was I.

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