



On the Knowledge of God Through Creatures St. Bonaventure

ONE ARTICLE ON THE KNOWABILITY OF GOD

QUESTION I.

WHETHER GOD IS KNOWABLE BY THE CREATURE

As regards the first, that God is not knowable by the creature is shown,

1. By the *authority* of Dionysius on Divine Names?: *It is possible neither to speak of nor to understand God.*

2. Again it is shown by reason by means of the fourfold supposition which is necessarily in knowledge, namely, proportion, union or reception, judgment, and information [i.e. endowment of form]. For the understanding understands only that which is proportional to it, and that which is united to it in some way, and that of which it judges, and that by which the vision of its understanding is informed [i.e. is endowed with form].

From the first supposition it is argued thus: it is necessary that there be a proportion of knower to knowable: but there is no proportion of God to the understanding, because God is infinite and the understanding finite: therefore etc. Moreover, if there is some proportion, it is seen that it is not sufficient, for the uncreated truth is further removed from the human understanding than any created intelligible is from the sense. But sense, which is perceptive of the sensible, is never elevated to knowledge of the created intelligible: therefore, neither will the understanding ever be elevated to knowledge of the uncreated intelligible.

3. Again, from the second supposition, thus: it is necessary that there be a union of the knowable to the knower, so that the one be in the other; however, the knower is not in the knowable, but conversely; but it is impossible that the infinite be grasped by the finite: therefore, it is impossible that the infinite be in the finite: therefore, it is impossible for God to be in the understanding, since he is infinite.

4. Again, from the third supposition, thus: it is necessary for knowledge that there be in the knower a judgment of the known; but every one who judges must have power over the judged; but a finite being does not have power over an infinite: therefore, a finite being does not judge an infinite; but judgment was required for knowledge: therefore, the finite understanding does not know the infinite God over whom it has no power.

5. Again. From the third supposition, this: it is necessary that the understanding be informed, when it knows, by that which is known; but everything which informs another, informs it either by *essence* or by *likeness*; but God does not inform by essence, for he is united to nothing as form, nor by abstracted likeness, for an abstracted likeness is more spiritual than that from which it is abstracted; nothing, however, is nor can be more spiritual than God: therefore etc.

To the contrary: 1. The rational soul is formed to the image of God. But as Augustine says in the book on the Trinity, and as is stated in the text of the present distinction: *The mind is*

the image of God in that by which it is capable [i.e. receptive] of God and by which it can be partaker of him. However, to be capable is not according to substance or essence, because he is thus in all creatures: therefore, by knowledge and love: therefore, God can be known by the creature.

2. Again, it is shown by reason, thus: all spiritual, knowledge is made by reason of light and by reason of uncreated light, as Augustine says in the *Soliloquies*; but light is in the highest degree knowable, and God is the greatest light: and therefore he is in the highest degree knowable to the soul itself: therefore etc.

3. Again, since knowledge of some things is by their presence, and knowledge of some by their likeness, those are known more truly which are known by presence, as Augustine says; but God is united to the soul itself by presence: therefore, God is known more truly than other things which are known by likeness.

4. Again, as the supreme goodness is related to love, so the supreme truth is related to knowledge; but the supreme goodness is supremely lovable by the affect: therefore, the supreme truth is supremely knowable by the understanding.

5. Again, each thing has power more efficaciously toward that to which it is ordered naturally; but our understanding is ordered naturally to the knowledge of the supreme light: therefore, the supreme light is knowable to it in the highest degree.

CONCLUSION

God, knowable in the highest degree in himself, would be in the highest degree knowable to us too, if there were no defect on the part of our understanding.

I reply: it must be said that God in himself as supreme light is in the highest degree knowable; and that, as light fulfilling our understanding in the highest degree and as far as he is of himself, he would be supremely knowable to us too, if there were not some defect on the part of the power knowing, which is not removed perfectly except through the deformity of glory. Therefore, the reasons must be granted, which prove that God is knowable by the creature and likewise most clearly knowable as far as he is of himself, if there were not something impeding or something deficient on the part of the understanding, as will be clear later.

1. To the objections to the contrary it must be said that there is knowledge by *comprehension* and knowledge by *apprehension*. Knowledge by *apprehension* consists in the manifestation of the truth of the thing known; but knowledge by *comprehension* consists in the inclusion of the totality. To the first knowledge a proportion of agreement is required; and there is such knowledge in the soul in respect to God, because *the soul is in a certain manner all things*, by assimilation to all, for it is formed naturally to know all things, and it is in the highest degree capable of God by assimilation, for it is the image and likeness of God. As regards knowledge by *comprehension*, a proportion of equality and equivalence is required; and there is no such proportion in the soul in respect to God, because the soul is finite, but God is infinite; and therefore it does not have this knowledge; and Dionysius meant this knowledge, and the objection holds concerning it, but not concerning the other.

2. To the objection which is raised concerning the distance of the intelligible and the sensible, it must be said that there is distance according to the relation [*ratio*] of being and according to the relation of *knowable* [i.e. there is a distance in so far as you consider them as beings and another in so far as you consider them as objects of knowledge]. In the first manner the distance is greater; in the second manner it is not, because both are intelligible, namely, God and the soul. It is not thus in the case of the understanding and sense, because sense is a determined power, but the understanding is not.

3. To the objection that the infinite is not grasped by the finite, some say that grasping the infinite is to be taken in two ways, namely, with respect to *essence*, and thus it is grasped; and with respect to *power*, and thus it is not grasped, just as a point is wholly determined by the line

with respect to substance, but not totally with respect to power. But this solution does not seem to solve, because in God essence is the same as power, and both are infinite.

Therefore, it must be said that infinity is to be taken in two senses: one, which is constituted by opposition to the simple; and such an infinite is not grasped by the finite, such as infinite mass; there is another which has infinity together with simplicity, such as God; and such an infinite, because it is simple, is everywhere whole; because it is infinite, it is in nothing in such wise that it is not outside it. It is to be understood thus in the case of the knowledge of God. And therefore it does not follow, although he is known whole, that he is comprehended, because the understanding does not include the totality of him, as the creature does not include his immensity.

4. To the objection which was raised: the one judging has power, etc., it must be said that judging of anything is in two ways: in the first way by distinguishing, whether it is or is not; and in this way judgment is proper to every understanding, when it knows, in respect to every object; in another way by approving or reproving, that it should be thus; and thus it does not judge of truth, but it judges according to it of other things, as Augustine says on *True Religion* that *the judge does not judge of the law, but he judges of other things according to the law*. And in this way what Augustine says is true, that *no one judges of that truth, yet no one judges without it*. And in this second way that which is stated in opposition is true, that the one who judges has power over that which is judged; but in the first way it is not true, that he has power over it; still he can be guided as toward the object by the help of it [i.e. the truth], information [endowing with form], it must be said that God is present to the soul itself and to every understanding by way of truth: therefore, it is not necessary that a likeness be abstracted from him, by which he may be known; yet none the less, when he is known by the understanding, the understanding is informed by a certain idea, which is, as it were, a certain likeness, not abstracted but impressed, inferior to God, because it is in an inferior nature, yet superior to the soul, because it makes the soul better. And Augustine says this in book IX on the *Trinity*, chapter eleven: *As, when we learn bodies by the senses of bodies, some likeness of them is made in our mind: so when we know God, some likeness of God is made; that idea, however, is inferior, because it is in an inferior nature*.

QUESTION II.

WHETHER GOD IS KNOWABLE THROUGH CREATURES

In the second place it is inquired whether God is knowable through creatures. And it seems that he is not.

1. For the way to error is not the way to knowledge; but knowledge through the creature is the way of error: therefore etc. The proof of the minor premise: in the *Book of Wisdom*, chapter fourteen; *The creatures of God are for deception and hatred and as a trap to the feet of fools*. Moreover, Augustine, on the *Free Will* speaks of those who are occupied with creatures: *turning their "back to you, they are fastened firmly in corporeal work as in their own shadows*.

2. Again, the way to know the luminous or the light is not darkness or the dark; but the creature is darkness whereas God is light: therefore, God is not knowable through the creature.

3. Again, the medium by which something is known or proved of an end term, must have something in common with that for which it must be known; but the Creator and the creature have nothing in common: therefore, God is not known through creatures.

4. Again, every medium by which one ascends to an end term is distant from it by finite steps; but every creature, howsoever noble, is distant from God by infinite steps, because however so many times it may be doubled, the creature will never attain to the nobility of God: therefore, by the creature one does not ascend to the knowledge of God.

To the contrary: 1. In the thirteenth chapter of the *Book of Wisdom* it is said: *From the*

greatness of the species and the creation it will be possible that the Creator of them be seen in knowledge. Wherefore Isidore *on the Highest Good* says: *From the beauty of the circumscribed creature God makes his beauty, which cannot be circumscribed, to be understood.*

2. Again, it is shown by reason, thus: not only may the effect be known by the cause, but also the cause by

the effect: therefore, if God is the cause operating according to his nobility, and the creature the effect, it will be possible that God be known through the creature.

3. Again, the sensible is the way of knowing the intelligible; but the creature is sensible, God intelligible: therefore, the way to come to the knowledge of the Creator is through the creature.

4. Again, like may be known through like; but every creature is like God, either as trace or as image: therefore, it comes about that through every creature God is known.

It is inquired, then, what difference there is between a trace and an image; and since there is in every creature a trace, it is inquired, why not in like manner an image, and in accordance with what the trace is so considered.

CONCLUSION

God can be known through creatures in the natural light of reason.

I reply: it must be said that as the cause shines forth in the effect, and as the wisdom of the artificer is manifested in his work, so God, who is the artificer and cause of the creature, is known through it.

And the reason for this is double, one is because of agreement, the other because of need: because of agreement, for every creature leads to God more than to anything else; because of need, for, since God as the supremely spiritual light could not be known in his spirituality by the understanding, which is almost material, the soul needs to know him through the creature.

1. To the objection which is raised that knowledge of the creature is the way to error, it must be said that the creature may be known in two ways: either with respect to *special properties*, which are of imperfection, or with respect to *general conditions*, which are of completion; but if with respect to special conditions and of imperfection: either by *attributing* them to God or by denying them. In the first fashion is the way of error, in the second the way of knowledge; and thus God is, known by denial.

But if he be known with respect to the conditions of *perfection*, this can be in two ways, as a picture is known in two ways: either as *picture* or as *image*: whence, either one rests in the beauty of the creature or by that one tends to something else. If in the first way, then it is the way which leads astray; wherefore Augustine in the book *on the Free Will*: Alas, for those who love, instead of you, your beckonings, and who stray among your traces [instead of rising from them to you], and who abandon you as leader. If in the second way, as it is the way to something else, so it is the reason of knowing by super excellence, for every noble quality in the creature must be attributed to God in the highest degree; and thus that is clear.

2. To the objection which is raised, that the dark medium is not the way for knowing light, it must be said that there is the well-disposed eye and the bleared eye. Of the well-disposed eye this is true, but not of the bleared eye, to which the overcasting cloud or the land receiving the clarity of the light is the medium for seeing the sun; thus for our understanding, which is like the eye of the owl to the things most manifest of nature, [the dark or the creature is the medium for knowing the light or God].

3. To the objection which is raised concerning the lack of community, it must be said that it is not common by *univocation*, but it is common by *analogy*, which names the relation of *two to two*, as in the sailor and the doctor, or of *one to one* as of the exemplar to the exemplified.

4. To the objection which is raised that there are always infinite steps, it must be said that the ascent to God can be in two ways: either with respect to the *sight of the presence*; and in that

way every creature is formed naturally to lead to God, nor are there infinite steps that way; or with respect to *equality of equivalence*; and in that way it is true that there are infinite steps, for the created good, howsoever much it be doubled, is never equal to the uncreated.

The *first* step, however, in respect to the ascent to the sight of the presence is in the consideration of visible

things, the *second* in the consideration of invisible things, as of the soul or of another spiritual substance; the *third* is from the soul to God, because the image is formed by truth itself and is joined immediately to God.

To the inquiry which was made last *concerning the difference of trace and image*, some make this difference, that the trace is in sensible things, the image in spiritual. But this distinction and position does not hold, because the trace is also in spiritual things. For unity, truth, goodness, in which there is a trace, are conditions in the highest degree universal and intelligible.

Others say that the trace is so called because it represents in respect to the part, but the image in respect to the whole. But this difference again does not hold because, as God is simple, he has no representative in respect to part; again since he is infinite, he can be represented with respect to the whole by absolutely no creature, not even by the whole world.

And therefore it must be understood that since the creature leads to the knowledge of God by the mode of *shadow*, by the mode of *trace*, and by the mode of *image*, the better known difference of these modes by which likewise they are named, is taken from the *mode of representing*. For shadow is spoken of in so far as it represents in a certain removal and confusion; trace in so far as it represents in removal but distinction; but image in so far as it represents in nearness and distinction.

From this difference is gathered a second which is in the conditions in which the three are found. For creatures are called a *shadow* with reference to properties which look to God in some kind of cause according to an undetermined relation [*ratio*]; a trace with reference to a property which looks to God under the relation of the triple cause, efficient, formal, and final, as one, true, and good; an image with reference to conditions which look to God not only in the relation of cause, but also of object; these are memory, understanding, and will.

From these, *two other differences are concluded*: with respect to the things to which they lead; for the creature as shadow leads to the knowledge of *common things* as *common*; as trace to knowledge of *common things* as appropriated; as image to knowledge of *properties* as *proper*.

Another difference is in the things in which these [three modes] are *discovered*. For as every creature is compared to God both in the relation of cause and in the relation of triple cause, so every creature is shadow or trace. But as only the rational creature is related to God as to its object, because he alone is capable of God by knowledge and love: so he alone is image.

QUESTION III.

WHETHER MAN IN EVERY STATE KNOWS GOD THROUGH CREATURES

In the third place it is inquired whether the knowledge of God through creatures is proper to man in respect to every state. That it is proper to man in respect to his first state is shown thus:

1. Man in the state of innocence did not know God face to face: therefore, if he knew God, he knew him through an effect, therefore through a trace, therefore through a creature.

2. Again, in man in the state of innocence sensible knowledge was not an impediment but an aid to intellectual knowledge; but the intellectual knowledge, for which man was made, is knowledge of God: therefore, all sensible knowledge in the first man was ordered to that end; but knowledge of God through the aid of sensibles is knowledge through the creature: therefore etc.

Again, that it is proper to man with respect to the *state of blessedness* is seen :

1. Because the Blessed know the creature, but do not remain in the creature, but return to God: therefore, they know God through the creature.
2. Again, the blessed souls praise God through creatures; but to praise God through creatures is to know through creatures: therefore etc.

But to the contrary: that it is not proper to man *as he was created* is shown thus.

1. Knowledge by trace is knowledge by a medium; but *the mind* as Augustine says, is formed by truth itself immediately: therefore, such knowledge is not suited to human nature with respect to that state, nor likewise with respect to any other.

2. Again, that is not the right order which goes to the end which is nearer, by a medium which is more distant; but man in his first state was nearer to God than to any other creatures: therefore, it was not fitting that he come to the knowledge of God by way of other creatures.

Again, that such knowledge is not proper to man with respect to the state of *blessedness* is seen.

1. Because knowledge by way of a trace is knowledge by manuduction: therefore, it is not perfect knowledge: therefore, it is from the part: therefore, it does not remain in the Blessed, because in them, that which is from the part will be laid aside.

2. Again, the trace or creature is like a ladder for ascending to, or like a road for arriving at, God; but when one has arrived at the end, there is no further use for the way: therefore similarly, when man is high up, he does not need a ladder; but the knowledge of the Blessed is immediately in God: therefore, it is not through creatures.

CONCLUSION

God is known in creatures perfectly by those who comprehend, half-fully by those on their way, but through creatures he is known properly by those on their way, in one way, however, before, and in another after the fall.

I reply: for the understanding of the aforesaid questions it must be noted that it is one thing to know God in the creature, another to know him through the creature. To know God in the creature is to know his presence and influence in the creature. And this is proper half-fully to those on their way, but perfectly to those who comprehend; whence Augustine says at the end of the book *on the City of God*, that God will then be seen expressly, when God will be all in all. To know God *through* the creature, however, is to be elevated from knowledge of the creature to knowledge of God as by the means of an intermediate ladder. And this is properly the possession of those on their way, as Bernard says to Eugenius.

Yet it is suited to man in different ways in the state of nature as created and in the state of fallen nature: because in the first state man knew God through the creature as *through a clear mirror*; but after the fall he knew him *as through a mirror and enigma*, as the Apostle says in the thirteenth chapter 42 of the *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, because of the overclouding of the understanding and the deterioration of things.

To the objection which is raised, therefore, concerning the state of *blessedness*, it must be said that, as has been said, it is not proper to the Blessed to know *through* creatures, but rather in creatures. And the reasons which seem to prove the contrary do not prove it, but rather that he is known by them in creatures.

1. To the objection which is raised concerning the state of *innocence*, that the mind is formed immediately, etc., it must be said that the medium is double, namely, *efficient* and *disposing*. What Augustine said should be understood of the first medium, but not of the second, since God is the efficient medium and the object of the mind itself. That argument, however, Augustine directs against the philosophers whose opinion was that the mind was not joined to the first

principle immediately, but with some intelligence mediating.

2. To the objection which is raised that that is not the right order, it must be said that man can be considered in two ways: either as that which is in himself or as that which is *outside himself*. In the first manner he does not attain through creatures from himself to God, but that which is outside himself is gathered through knowledge of creatures into himself and is raised up above himself.

Or it must be said that other creatures can be considered as things or as signs. In the *first* way they are inferior to man, in the *second* manner they are media in becoming or on the way, not at the end, because they do not reach to the end, but through them man reaches God, having left them behind him.

QUESTION IV.

WHETHER THE TRINITY OF PERSONS TOGETHER WITH THE UNITY OF ESSENCE CAN BE KNOWN NATURALLY THROUGH CREATURES

In the fourth and last place it is inquired what is knowable of God through creatures. And the Apostle says the *everlasting power and divinity*. And it is inquired whether the plurality of persons can be known through creatures. And it seems that it can.

1. Because philosophers had no knowledge of God except through creatures, and they knew the Trinity: therefore etc. The minor premise is clear by Augustine *on the City of God: Philosophers say that philosophy is tripartite*, in which there is knowledge of the Trinity.

2. Again, the magicians failed in the third sign, according to the eighth book of *Exodus*; and it is expounded that they failed in knowledge of the third person; either therefore with respect to *properties* or with respect to *appropriated qualities*. Not with respect to appropriated qualities, because goodness shines forth to us in the creature: therefore, with respect to properties: therefore, they knew at least two persons.

3. Again, this same conclusion appears through *reason*: for the trace, since it names a distinction, is a reason of knowing God distinctively or in distinction; but there is in God only a distinction of persons: therefore, through 'the trace they could know the distinction of persons.

4. Again, there is knowledge of the Trinity by image with respect to order, distinction, and equality; but knowledge by image is knowledge through creature: therefore, they could know the Trinity through the creature.

5. Again, knowledge of the hidden properties of a creature is more difficult than knowledge of the plurality of persons, because the former is grasped only by great and subtle minds, whereas the latter is grasped even by the untutored and by fools : therefore, if they have been able to arrive by way of the visible properties of creatures at invisible things, all the more are they able to arrive at the knowledge that the persons are many. And it is this that is said in the thirteenth chapter of the *Book of Wisdom*: *For if they have been able to "know so much that they are able to estimate the world, how have they not more easily found the Lord of it?*

To the contrary: 1. Knowledge of the Trinity is knowledge of faith ; but knowledge of faith is of those things which are above reason; and the things which are above reason can not be known through creatures: therefore etc.

2. Again, knowledge of God through creatures is had in only two ways, either by affirming what is in the creature or the like, or else by denying it; but the Trinity is not known through denial, but by affirmation; but in no creature is there found a plurality of supposita together with a unity of essence: therefore etc.

3. Again, the written law is above the law of nature, or the book of the sacred Scripture above the book of the mundane creation; but no one lacking faith comes to knowledge of the plurality of persons through the sacred Scripture: therefore, much the less through the book of mundane creation.

CONCLUSION

The Trinity of persons is not knowable through creatures, but only the trinity of qualities appropriated, namely, unity, truth, goodness.

I reply: that it must be said that the plurality of persons together with a unity of essence is the property of the divine nature alone, the like of which is not found in the creature nor can be found nor can be thought rationally: therefore, in no wise is the trinity of persons knowable through the creature by ascending rationally from the creature to God. But although it has absolutely no like, it has nevertheless in some way that which is believed to be like in the creature. Whence I say that the philosophers never knew the trinity of persons by reason, nor even the plurality of persons, unless they had some condition of faith, such as some heretics have; whence the things which they said, either were spoken without their understanding them, or else they were illumined by the ray of faith.

There is another trinity of qualities appropriated, namely, of unity, truth, and goodness, and they knew this trinity, because it has a like.

1. To that objection which is raised, therefore; that the philosophers knew the Trinity by way of tripartite philosophy, it must be said that it is true that by this and by other means they came to a knowledge of appropriated qualities, but those who believe come to a knowledge of both trinities.

2. To the objection which is raised concerning the third sign, it is said and well said, that the wise men are said to have failed thus in the third sign, because they failed in knowledge of the most potent effect of goodness, namely, of redemption.

3. To another it must be said that a trace indicates a distinction of essential properties, and to this corresponds the trinity of appropriated qualities, not the trinity of properties or of persons.

4. To the objection which is raised concerning image, it must be said that knowing the soul is either according to that which it is; and this knowledge is of reason; or else it is according to that of which it is image; and that knowledge is of faith alone.

5. To the objection which is raised finally, that it is more difficult to know the world, it must be said that this is to be understood, when divine aid has been added; but speaking absolutely it is false. For man would be disposed to faith, more quickly than he would acquire a knowledge of philosophy. Our understanding, nevertheless, has more power in the knowledge of mundane things than of the Trinity, for the Trinity is above reason, and our intellect sees the contrary of the trinity in sense; and therefore it needs new elevation, such as knowledge by infusion.

Bonaventure. "Knowledge of God Through Creatures." *Commentary on the Four Books of the Sentences of Peter Lombard*. Richard McKeon, ed. *Selections from Medieval Philosophers. Vol. 2. Roger Bacon to William of Ockham*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930. This text is the public domain.

© SophiaOmni, 2014. The specific electronic form of this text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.