

BOOK VI

Secular Ambitions and Conflicts

i (1) 'My hope from my youth' (Ps. 70: 5), where were you, and where did you 'withdraw' from me (Ps. 10: 1)? Did you not make me, and 'make me superior to the animals, and make me wiser than the birds of heaven' (Job 35: 10-11)? I was walking through darkness and 'a slippery place' (Ps. 34: 6). I was seeking for you outside myself, and I failed to find 'the God of my heart' (Ps. 72: 26). I had come into the depth of the sea (Ps. 67: 23). I had no confidence, and had lost hope that truth could be found.

My mother, strong in her devotion, had already come to join me, following me by land and sea, and in all dangers serenely confident in you. During a hazardous voyage she encouraged the crew themselves who are accustomed to offering consolation to frightened travellers with no experience of the deep sea. She promised them a safe arrival, for in a vision you had promised this to her. She found me in a dangerous state of depression. I had lost all hope of discovering the truth. Yet when I informed her that I was not now a Manichee, though neither was I a Catholic Christian, she did not leap for joy as if she had heard some unexpected news; she was already free from anxiety about that part of my wretched condition, for which she wept over me as a person dead but to be revived by you. In her mind she was offering me before you on a bier, so that you could say, as you said to the widow's son 'Young man, I say to you, arise' (Luke 7: 12); and then he would recover and begin to speak and you would restore him to his mother.

So no excited jubilation caused her heart to beat faster when she heard that so large a part of what she daily and tearfully prayed for had already come about. I had not yet attained the truth, but I was rescued from falsehood. Moreover, because she felt certain that you were going to grant what remained, when you had promised the whole, very calmly and with her heart full of confidence she replied to me that she had faith in Christ that before she departed this life, she

would see me a baptized Catholic believer. That indeed she said to me. To you, fount of mercies, she redoubled her petitions and tears, begging that you would hasten your help (Ps. 69: 1) and lighten my darknesses (Ps. 17: 29). She would zealously run to the Church to hang on Ambrose's lips, to 'the fount of water bubbling up to eternal life' (John 4: 14). She loved that man as an angel of God (Gal. 4: 14) when she knew that it was through him that I had been brought to that state of hesitancy and wavering. I was to pass through that from sickness to health, but with a more acute danger intervening, like that high fever preceding recovery which the physicians call 'the critical onset'.²

ii (2) In accordance with my mother's custom in Africa, she had taken to the memorial shrines of the saints cakes and bread and wine, and was forbidden by the janitor. When she knew that the bishop was responsible for the prohibition, she accepted it in so devout and docile a manner that I myself was amazed how easy it was for her to find fault with her own custom rather than to dispute his ban. Her spirit was not obsessed by excessive drinking, and no love of wine stimulated her into opposing the truth, as is the case with many men and women who, when one sings them the song of sobriety, feel as nauseated as drunkards when offered a watery drink. After bringing her basket of ceremonial food which she would first taste and then share round the company, she used to present not more than one tiny glass of wine diluted to suit her very sober palate. She would take a sip as an act of respect. If there were many memorial shrines of the dead which were to be honoured in that way, it was one and the same cup which she carried about and presented at each place. The wine was not merely drenched with water but also quite tepid; the share she gave to those present was only small sips. Her quest was for devotion, not pleasure. When she learnt that the famous preacher and religious leader had ordered that no such offerings were to be made, even by those who acted soberly, to avert any pretext for intoxication being given to drinkers and because the ceremonies were like meals to propitiate the departed spirits and similar to heathen superstition,³ she happily

² Augustine (*Sermon on Ps. 72*) says: 'The sick feel less ill when recovery is distant, but are in a higher fever when it is close; physicians call this the "accessio critica".'

³ Ambrose (*On Elias 6a*) mentions his ban. Augustine vainly tried to stop the incubation at martyrs' shrines in Africa, where (as one letter records) drink was a major social

¹ Plotinus says God is not to be sought in external things (6. 5. 1. 31).

abstained. Instead of a basket full of the fruits of the earth, she learned to bring a heart full of purer vows to the memorials of the martyrs. She would give what she could to the needy; and then the communion of the Lord's body was celebrated at the shrines of the martyrs who in imitation of the Lord's passion were sacrificed and crowned.

Yet it seems to me, Lord my God—and this is the conviction of my heart in your sight (Ps. 18: 15)—that she would not have yielded easily on the prohibition of this custom if the ban had come from another whom she did not love like Ambrose. For the sake of my salvation she was wholly devoted to him, and he loved her for her deeply religious pattern of life. In good works 'fervent in spirit' (Rom. 12: 11), she was habitually at the Church. When he saw me, he often broke out in praise of her, congratulating me on having such a mother, unaware of what kind of son she had in me—someone who doubted all these things and believed it impossible to find the way of life.

iii (3) I had not yet come to groan in prayer that you might come to my aid. My mind was intent on inquiry and restless for debate. Ambrose himself I thought a happy man as the world judges things, for he was held in honour by the great and powerful. Only his celibacy seemed to me painful. But I had no notion nor any experience to know what were his hopes, what struggles he had against the temptations of his distinguished position, what consolations in adversities, and the hidden aspect of his life—what was in his heart, what delicious joys came as he fed on and digested your bread. He for his part did not know of my emotional crisis nor the abyss of danger threatening me. I could not put the questions I wanted to put to him as I wished to do. I was excluded from his ear and from his mouth by crowds of men with arbitrations to submit to him, to whose frailties he ministered.⁴ When he was not with them, which was a very brief period of time, he restored either his body with necessary food or his mind by reading. When he was reading, his eyes ran over the page and his heart perceived the sense, but his voice and tongue were silent. He

problem. The defensive tone here and in IN. viii (18) suggests rumours that Monica was addicted to the bottle. Photinus (5: 5, 11) is sharply critical of pagan festivals which people attend for the beano rather than to honour the god.

⁴ In consequence of 1 Cor. 6: 1 ancient bishops expended vast time and energy on arbitrations between members of their flock. Cf. VI. ix (15) below.

did not restrict access to anyone coming in, nor was it customary even for a visitor to be announced. Very often when we were there, we saw him silently reading and never otherwise. After sitting for a long time in silence (for who would dare to burden him in such intent concentration?) we used to go away. We supposed that in the brief time he could find for his mind's refreshment, free from the hubbub of other people's troubles, he would not want to be invited to consider another problem. We wondered if he read silently perhaps to protect himself in case he had a hearer interested and intent on the matter, to whom he might have to expound the text being read if it contained difficulties, or who might wish to debate some difficult questions. If his time were used up in that way, he would get through fewer books than he wished. Besides, the need to preserve his voice, which used easily to become hoarse, could have been a very fair reason for silent reading. Whatever motive he had for his habit, this man had a good reason for what he did.⁵

(4) Certainly no opportunity came my way to put the questions I wished to put to your holy oracle, his heart, except when there was something requiring only a brief interview. My hot passions required a considerable period when he could be free for me to pour out my story to him, and that was never found. However, every Lord's day⁶ I heard him 'rightly preaching the word of truth' (2 Tim. 2: 15) among the people. More and more my conviction grew that all the knotty problems and clever calumnies which those deceivers of ours had devised against the divine books could be dissolved. I also learnt that your sons, whom you have regenerated by grace through their mother the Catholic Church, understood the text concerning man being made by you in your image (Gen. 1: 26) not to mean that they believed and thought you to be bounded by the form of a human body. Although I had not the least notion or even an obscure suspicion how there could be spiritual substance, yet I was glad, if also ashamed, to discover that I had been barking for years not against the Catholic faith but against mental figments of physical images. My rashness and impiety lay in the fact that what I ought to have verified by investigation I had simply asserted as an accusation. You who are most high and most near, most secret and most

⁵ In antiquity silent reading was uncommon, not unknown.
⁶ Augustine disapproved of planetary names for the days of the week, *Dominica for Sunday*.

present, have no bodily members, some larger, others smaller, but are everywhere a whole and never limited in space.⁷ You are certainly not our physical shape. Yet you made humanity in your image, and man from head to foot is contained in space.

iv (5) Being ignorant what your image consisted in, I should have knocked (Matt. 7: 7) and inquired about the meaning of this belief, and not insulted and opposed it, as if the belief meant what I thought. My concern to discover what I could hold for certain gnawed at my vitals the more painfully as I felt shame to have been suffering so long from illusion. Deceived with promises of certainty, with childish error and rashness I had mindlessly repeated many uncertain things as if they were certain. That they were false became clear to me only later. But it was certain that they were uncertain and for a period had been treated by me as certain when I contended against your Catholic Church with blind accusations. Even if it was not yet evident that the Church taught the truth, yet she did not teach the things of which I harshly accused her. So I was confused with shame. I was being turned around. And I was glad, my God, that your one Church, the body of your only Son in which on me as an infant Christ's name was put, did not hold infantile follies nor in her sound doctrine maintain that you, the Creator of all things, occupy a vast and huge area of space and are nevertheless bounded on all sides and confined within the shape of the human body.

(6) I was also pleased that when the old writings of the Law and the Prophets came before me, they were no longer read with an eye to which they had previously looked absurd, when I used to attack your saints as if they thought what in fact they did not think at all. And I was delighted to hear Ambrose in his sermons to the people saying, as if he were most carefully enunciating a principle of exegesis: 'The letter kills, the spirit gives life' (2 Cor. 3: 6).⁸ Those texts which, taken literally, seemed to contain perverse teaching he would expound spiritually, removing the mystical veil. He did not say anything that I felt to be a difficulty; but whether what he said was true I still did not know. Fearing a precipitate plunge, I kept my heart from giving any assent, and in that state of suspended judge-

⁷ Plotinus 3. 9. 4; 5. 5. 8–9.
⁸ Cited in this sense by Ambrose, *Sermon 19*.

ment I was suffering a worse death. I wanted to be as certain about things I could not see as I am certain that seven and three are ten. I was not so mad as to think that I could consider even that to be something unknowable. But I desired other things to be as certain as this truth, whether physical objects which were not immediately accessible to my senses, or spiritual matters which I knew no way of thinking about except in physical terms.

By believing I could have been healed. My mind's eye thus purified would have been directed in some degree towards your truth which abides for ever and is indefectible. But just as it commonly happens that a person who has experienced a bad physician is afraid of entrusting himself to a good one, so it was with the health of my soul. While it could not be healed except by believing, it was refusing to be healed for fear of believing what is false. It resisted your healing hands, though you have prepared the medicines of faith,⁹ have applied them to the sicknesses of the world, and have given them such power.

v (7) From this time on, however, I now gave my preference to the Catholic faith. I thought it more modest and not in the least misleading to be told by the Church to believe what could not be demonstrated—whether that was because a demonstration existed but could not be understood by all or whether the matter was not one open to rational proof—rather than from the Manichees to have a rash promise of knowledge with mockery of mere belief, and then afterwards to be ordered to believe many fabulous and absurd myths impossible to prove true. Then little by little, Lord, with a most gentle and merciful hand you touched and calmed my heart. I considered the innumerable things I believed which I had not seen, events which occurred when I was not present, such as many incidents in the history of the nations, many facts concerning places and cities which I had never seen, many things accepted on the word of friends, many from physicians, many from other people. Unless we believed what we were told, we would do nothing at all in this life. Finally, I realized how unmoveably sure I was about the identity of my parents from whom I came, which I could not know unless I believed what I had heard. You persuaded me that the defect lay not with those who believed

⁹ i.e. the Bible and the sacraments in the life of the Church.

your books, which you have established with such great authority among almost all nations, but with those who did not believe them. Nor were they to be listened to who might say to me 'How do you know that these books were provided for the human race by the Spirit of the one true and utterly truthful God?' That very thing was a matter in which belief was of the greatest importance; for no attacks based on cavilling questions of the kind of which I had read so much in the mutually contradictory philosophers could ever force me not to believe that you are (though what you are I could not know) or that you exercise a providential care over human affairs.

(8) My belief in this was sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker. But at least I always retained belief both that you are and that you care for us, even if I did not know what to think about your substantial nature or what way would lead, or lead me back, to you. So since we were too weak to discover the truth by pure reasoning and therefore needed the authority of the sacred writings, I now began to believe that you would never have conferred such pre-eminent authority on the scripture, now diffused through all lands, unless you had willed that it would be a means of coming to faith in you and a means of seeking to know you. Already the absurdity which used to offend me in those books, after I had heard many passages being given persuasive expositions, I understood to be significant of the profundity of their mysteries. The authority of the Bible seemed the more to be venerated and more worthy of a holy faith on the ground that it was open to everyone to read, while keeping the dignity of its secret meaning for a profounder interpretation. The Bible offered itself to all in very accessible words and the most humble style of diction, while also exercising the concentration of those who are not 'light of heart' (Ecclus. 19: 4). It welcomes all people to its generous embrace, and also brings a few to you through narrow openings (cf. Matt. 7: 13–14). Though the latter are few, they are much more numerous than would be the case if the Bible did not stand out by its high authority and if it had not drawn crowds to the bosom of its holy humility. These were my reflections and you were present to me. I sighed and you heard me. I wavered and you steadied me. I travelled along the broad way of the world, but you did not desert me.

vi (9) I aspired to honours, money, marriage, and you laughed at me. In those ambitions I suffered the bitterest difficulties; that was by your mercy—so much the greater in that you gave me the less occasion to find sweet pleasure in what was not you. Look into my heart, Lord. In obedience to your will I recall this and confess to you. May my soul now adhere to you. You detached it from the birdlime which held me fast in death. How unhappy it was! Your scalpel cut to the quick of the wound, so that I should leave all these ambitions and be converted to you, who are 'above all things' (Rom. 9: 5) and without whom all things are nothing, and that by conversion I should be healed. How unhappy I was, and how conscious you made me of my misery, on that day when I was preparing to deliver a panegyric on the emperor!¹⁰ In the course of it I would tell numerous lies and for my mendacity would win the good opinion of people who knew it to be untrue. The anxiety of the occasion was making my heart palpitate and perspire with the destructive fever of the worry, when I passed through a Milan street and noticed a destitute beggar. Already drunk, I think, he was joking and laughing. I groaned and spoke with the friends accompanying me about the many sufferings that result from our follies. In all our strivings such as those efforts that were then worrying me, the goads of ambition impelled me to drag the burden of my unhappiness with me, and in dragging it to make it even worse; yet we had no goal other than to reach a carefree cheerfulness. That beggar was already there before us, and perhaps we would never achieve it. For what he had gained with a few coins, obtained by begging, that is the cheerfulness of temporal felicity, I was going about to reach by painfully twisted and roundabout ways. True joy he had not. But my quest to fulfil my ambitions was much falser. There was no question that he was happy and I racked with anxiety. He had no worries; I was frenetic, and if anyone had asked me if I would prefer to be merry or to be racked with fear, I would have answered 'to be merry'. Yet if he asked whether I would prefer to be a beggar like that man or the kind of person I then was, I would have chosen to be myself, a bundle of anxieties and fears. What an absurd

¹⁰ Since Valentinian II became emperor on 22 Nov. 375, the most probable date for this panegyric is 22 Nov. 384. Augustine elsewhere mentions that he delivered a panegyric at Milan for the inauguration of the new consul Baeto (*contra litteras Petilianus* 3: 36), 1 Jan. 385. Everyone knew that such speeches were mendacious (Plotinus 5: 5).

choice! Surely it could not be the right one. For I ought not to have put myself above him on the ground of being better educated, a matter from which I was deriving no pleasure. My education enabled me to seek to please men, not to impart to them any instruction, but merely to purvey pleasure. For that reason you 'broke my bones' (Ps. 41: 11; 50: 10) with the rod of your discipline (Ps. 22: 4).

(10) Let them depart from my soul who say to it: 'There is a different quality in the source of pleasure: the beggar found his pleasure in drink, you wanted to find yours in glory.' But Lord what glory is there which is not in you? Just as his glory was not the real thing, so neither was my glory real, and it turned my head still further. That night the beggar was going to sleep off his intoxication. I slept and rose with mine, and was to sleep and get up again with it for many days. Of course there is a difference in the source of a person's pleasure, I know it. And the joy of a believing hope is incomparably greater than that vanity. But at that time there was also this gulf between us: he was far happier, not merely because he was soaked in cheerfulness while I was eviscerated with anxieties, but also because he had acquired wine by wishing good luck to passers-by, whereas I sought an arrogant success by telling lies. This is the sense of much that I said to my friends at the time. I often observed their condition to be much the same as mine, and my state I found to be bad; this caused me further suffering and a redoubling of my sense of futility. If success ever smiled on me, I would feel that it was not worth the effort to take the opportunity, since, almost before I had grasped it, the chance flew away.

vii (11) The group of us who lived together as friends used to deplore these things. I used especially to discuss them with Alypius and Nebridius. Among this group Alypius came from the same town as myself. His parents were leading citizens. He was younger than I and had attended my classes when I began to teach in our town and later at Carthage. He was much attached to me because I seemed to him good and cultured, and I was attached to him because of the solid virtue of his character, which was already apparent when he was of no great age. Nevertheless, the whirlpool of Carthaginian morals, with their passion for empty public shows, sucked him into the folly of the circus games. At the time when he was miserably involved in that, I was using a public lecture room as

professor of rhetoric there. He had not yet heard me lecturing because of a certain estrangement which had arisen between me and his father. I had discovered his fatal passion for the circus, and was gravely concerned because he seemed to me about to throw away or even already to have thrown away a career of high promise. But there was no means of warning him and recalling him by imposing some degree of pressure, either by the benevolence of friendship or by exercising the authority of a teacher. Moreover, I thought that his opinion of me coincided with his father's. In fact he did not so think of me. So he put aside his father's wish in this matter and began to greet me, coming into my lecture room to listen for a while and then to leave.

(12) I had forgotten my intention to have a word with him to dissuade him from ruining such good abilities by a blind and rash enthusiasm for empty games. But Lord, you who preside over the government of everything which you have created, had not forgotten him who among your sons was to be a presiding minister of your mystery.¹¹ His amendment of life should really be attributed to you, even if you brought it about through my agency, although I did not know it. One day I was sitting at the usual place and my pupils were present before me. He came in, greeted me, sat down, and gave his attention to the subject under discussion. I was expounding a text which happened to be in my hands. While I was expounding it, it seemed opportune to use an illustration from the circus games which I used to make my point clear, and to make the matter clearer and more agreeable I was bitingly sarcastic about those captivated by this folly. 'You know, our God' (Ps. 68: 6) that at that moment I had no thought of rescuing Alypius from the plague. But he took it to heart, and believed that I had said it exclusively with him in mind. An allusion which another person might have taken as cause for being angry with me, the noble young man took as cause for anger with himself, and for loving me the more ardently. You said long ago and inserted in your scriptures: 'Rebuke a wise man and he will love you' (Prov. 9: 8). I had not rebuked him. But you use all, both those aware of it and those unaware of it, in the order which you know—and that order is just. Out of my heart and

¹¹ Alypius became bishop of Thagaste while Augustine was still presbyter at Hippo. He frequently appears in Augustine's letters, and probably died soon after Augustine.

tongue you made burning coals (Ezek. 1: 13) by which you cauterized and cured a wasting mind of high promise. Let silence about your praises be for the person who does not consider your mercies (Ps. 77: 4); your mercies make confession to you from the marrow of my being (Ps. 106: 8). For on hearing those words he jumped out of the deep pit in which he was sinking by his own choice and where he was blinded by an astonishing pleasure. With strict self-control he gave his mind a shaking, and all the filth of the circus games dropped away from him, and he stopped going to them. Finally, he persuaded his reluctant father to allow him to attend me as a teacher. His father yielded and granted his request. He began again to attend my classes, and became involved together with me in Manichee superstition. He admired the show of continence among them, which he thought authentic and genuine. But it was a mad and seductive play which 'captured precious souls' (Prov. 6: 26) that do not yet know how to touch virtue at its depth and are easily deceived by surface appearances. It was only a shadow and simulation of virtue.

viii (13) Alypius did not indeed abandon the earthly career of whose prizes his parents had sung to him. He had arrived in Rome before I did to study law. There he had been seized by an incredible obsession for gladiatorial spectacles and to an unbelievable degree. He held such spectacles in aversion and detestation; but some of his friends and fellow-pupils on their way back from a dinner happened to meet him in the street and, despite his energetic refusal and resistance, used friendly violence to take him into the amphitheatre during the days of the cruel and murderous games. He said: 'If you drag my body to that place and sit me down there, do not imagine you can turn my mind and my eyes to those spectacles. I shall be as one not there, and so I shall overcome both you and the games.' They heard him, but none the less took him with them, wanting perhaps to discover whether he could actually carry it off. When they arrived and had found seats where they could, the entire place seethed with the most monstrous delight in the cruelty. He kept his eyes shut and forbade his mind to think about such fearful evils. Would that he had blocked his ears as well! A man fell in combat. A great roar from the entire crowd struck him with such vehemence that he was overcome by curiosity. Supposing

himself strong enough to despise whatever he saw and to conquer it, he opened his eyes. He was struck in the soul by a wound graver than the gladiator in his body, whose fall had caused the roar. The shouting entered by his ears and forced open his eyes. Thereby it was the means of wounding and striking to the ground a mind still more bold than strong, and the weaker for the reason that he presumed on himself when he ought to have relied on you. As soon as he saw the blood, he at once drank in savagery and did not turn away. His eyes were riveted. He imbibed madness. Without any awareness of what was happening to him, he found delight in the murderous contest and was inebriated by bloodthirsty pleasure. He was not now the person who had come in, but just one of the crowd which he had joined, and a true member of the group which had brought him. What should I add? He looked, he yelled, he was on fire, he took the madness home with him so that it urged him to return not only with those by whom he had originally been drawn there, but even more than them, taking others with him.

Nevertheless, from this you delivered him by your most strong and merciful hand, and you taught him to put his confidence not in himself but in you (Isa. 57: 13). But that was much later.

ix (14) This experience, however, rested in his memory to provide a remedy in the future. So too did the following incident which happened when he was still a student and already my pupil at Carthage. He was in the forum at midday thinking about a declamation he was to give after the usual manner of scholastic exercises. You allowed him to be arrested by the officers of the market as a thief. I think the reason why you, our God, allowed this was so that the man who was destined to have such weighty responsibilities should even then begin to learn that in court trials one should be on one's guard against hasty credulity in condemning a man. He was walking up and down alone in front of the lawcourt with his wax tablets and stylus. Suddenly a young man who was one of the students and the real thief, carrying a hidden hatchet, came to the leaden gratings which cover the shops of the silversmiths without Alypius noticing him, and began to hack at the lead. The silversmiths below heard the sound of the hatchet, conferred in whispers, and sent people to catch whoever they might happen to find. The thief heard their voices, dropped his tool, and ran off in

fear to avoid being caught with it. Alypius, who had not seen him go in, perceived him as he came out and saw him running off at speed. Wanting to know the reason, he went into the place, found the hatchet, and was standing and reflecting in bemused astonishment when suddenly the party who had been sent found him alone with the iron in his hand, the sound of which had stirred them into coming. They arrested him, dragged him off, and before a crowd of the tenants of the forum they gloried in having apprehended a thief redhanded. From there he was taken to be brought before the judges.

(15) But this was as far as Alypius' lesson went. At once Lord, you came to help an innocence of which you were the sole witness. As he was being taken either to prison or to torture, they met on the road a certain architect who had principal responsibility for public buildings. They were extremely delighted to meet him, for the tenants were commonly suspected by him of removing items which had disappeared from the forum. Now at last he would know the person responsible for the losses. But the man had often seen Alypius in the house of a certain senator to whom he paid frequent visits. He recognized him at once, and taking him by the hand removed him from the crowd and asked him the cause of such an embarrassing situation. When he knew what had occurred, he ordered all the people there, who were in an uproar and making threatening shouts, to come along with him. They came by the house of the young man who had done the deed. In front of the entrance there was a slave boy, so young that he had no fear of compromising his master and could easily be made to tell all. In the forum he had been spotted accompanying him. Alypius recognized him and told the architect. Alypius showed the boy the hatchet and asked him whose it was. 'Ours' he promptly replied. Then he was subjected to interrogation and revealed the rest. So the court case was transferred to that house, and the crowds which had already begun to triumph over Alypius were confounded. The future dispenser of your word and examiner of many arbitrations in your Church went away with increased experience and wisdom.

x (16) So I found Alypius at Rome. He attached himself to me with the strongest bond and was to accompany me to Milan, so that he would not be parted from me and also in order to practise law of

which he had been a student, thereby falling in with his parents' wish rather than his own inclination. Three times already he had sat as an assessor¹² and manifested a self-control astonishing to others, while he was much more astonished to find that they preferred gold to their integrity. His character was tested not only by the seductions of avarice but also by the prick of fear. At Rome he was assessor to the count of the Italian Treasury.¹³ There was at that time an extremely powerful senator. Many people were kept under his power by bribes or subdued by terror. He wanted as usual to use his influence to obtain something which by the laws was unlawful. Alypius resisted. A bribe was promised. He scorned it resolutely. Threats were made. He kicked them away, and everyone was amazed at so exceptional a character who neither wished to have as a friend nor feared to have as his enemy a powerful person, celebrated for his immense reputation, who had innumerable methods of either benefiting or injuring people. The judge himself, to whom Alypius was adviser, also wished to refuse the application, but did not openly turn it down and threw the responsibility for the case on to Alypius. He asserted that Alypius would not allow him to grant it. The plain truth was that, if he made the grant, Alypius would have resigned.

One thing alone almost led him astray because of his passion for books. He could have manuscripts copied for his own use at special government rates. He deliberated on the justice of this, and decided on the better choice, judging it more expedient to keep integrity, which would forbid it, than to use the power by which it was an allowed perquisite.

This is a small matter. But 'he who is faithful in little is faithful also in much' (Luke 16: 10–22). The word which proceeds from the mouth of your truth will never be empty (cf. Isa. 55: 11): 'If you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will give you the true? And if you have not been faithful with someone else's property, who will give you your own?' (Luke 16: 11–12).

That was the character of the man who then attached himself to me and used to debate with me, hesitant what manner of life ought to be adopted.

¹² In Roman courts of law untrained magistrates sat with trained lawyers as assessors.
¹³ The 'count of Italian largesses' was in charge of all government finance in Italy, immediately answerable to the Count of the Sacred (i.e. Imperial) Largesses, the supreme Treasury officer of State.

(17) Nebridius also, after leaving his home near Carthage and Carthage itself where he spent most of his time, abandoned his father's fine country seat, left home and his mother, who was not to follow him, and came to Milan. In his burning enthusiasm for the truth and for wisdom, his single motive was to live with me. Like me he sighed, and like me he vacillated, ardent in his quest for the happy life and a most acute investigator of very difficult questions. So there were the mouths of three hungry people, sharing with each other the sighs of their own state of need, and looking to you 'to give them their food in due season' (Ps. 114: 15; 103: 27). By your mercy our worldly activities always brought some bitterness in their train, and we reflected on the reason why we endured this. We met only darkness and turned away in disappointment to say 'How long is this to go on?' We frequently used to speak in this way. But although that is what we said, we did not give up those activities. There was no certain source of light which we could grasp after we had abandoned them.

xi (18) I myself was exceedingly astonished as I anxiously reflected how long a time had elapsed since the nineteenth year of my life, when I began to burn with a zeal for wisdom, planning that when I had found it I would abandon all the empty hopes and lying follies of hollow ambitions. And here I was already thirty, and still mucking about in the same mire in a state of indecision, avid to enjoy present fugitive delights which were dispersing my concentration, while I was saying: 'Tomorrow I shall find it; see, it will become perfectly clear, and I shall have no more doubts. Faustus will come and explain everything. What great men the Academic philosophers were! Nothing for the conduct of life can be a matter of assured knowledge. Yet let us seek more diligently and not lose heart. The books of the Church we now know not to contain absurdities. The things which seemed absurd can also be understood in another way which is edifying. Let me fix my feet on that step where as a boy I was placed by my parents, until clear truth is found. But where may it be sought?

'When can it be sought? Ambrose has no time. There is no time for reading. Where should we look for the books we need? Where and when can we obtain them? From whom can we borrow them? Fixed times must be kept free, hours appointed, for the health of

the soul. Great hope has been aroused. The Catholic faith does not teach what we thought and we were mistaken in criticizing it. The Church's educated men think it wrong to believe that God is bounded by the shape of a human body. Why do we hesitate to knock at the door which opens the way to all the rest? Our pupils occupy our mornings; what should we do with the remaining hours? Why do we not investigate our problem? But then when should we go to pay respects to our more influential friends, whose patronage we need?¹⁴ When are we to prepare what our students are paying for? When are we to refresh ourselves by allowing the mind to relax from the tension of anxieties?

(19) 'Let all that perish! Let us set aside these vain and empty ambitions. Let us concentrate ourselves exclusively on the investigation of the truth. Life is a misery, death is uncertain. It may suddenly carry us off. In what state shall we depart this life? Where are we to learn the things we have neglected here? And must we not rather pay for this negligence with punishments? What if death itself will cut off and end all anxiety by annihilating the mind? This too, then, is a question needing scrutiny.

'But put aside the idea that death can be like that. It is not for nothing, not empty of significance, that the high authority of the Christian faith is diffused throughout the world. The deity would not have done all that for us, in quality and in quantity, if with the body's death the soul's life were also destroyed. Why then do we hesitate to abandon secular hopes and to dedicate ourselves wholly to God and the happy life?

'But wait a moment. Secular successes are pleasant. They have no small sweetness of their own. Our motivation is not to be deflected from them by a superficial decision; for it would be a disgrace to return to the secular again. It is a considerable thing to set out to obtain preferment to high office. And what worldly prize could be more desirable? We have plenty of influential friends.

¹⁴ A vivid picture of the social system presupposed here is given by the pagan historian Ammianus Marcellinus (14. 6. 12–13) in a jaundiced account of the Roman aristocracy in the later Roman Empire. It was common for highly placed persons to feel an obligation towards dependent clients from the same region. The concentration of people from North Africa in and around the Milan court at this time, reflected in Augustine's circle of friends, strongly suggests that there was at least one highly placed person from Africa who had power. In the next paragraph Augustine remarks that he had 'plenty of influential friends.'

Provided that we are single-minded and exert much pressure, it should be possible to obtain at least the governorship of a minor province. It would be necessary to marry a wife with some money to avert the burden of heavy expenditure,¹⁵ and that would be the limit of our ambition. Many great men entirely worthy of imitation have combined the married state with a dedication to the study of wisdom.'

(20) That was what I used to say, and these winds blew first one way, then the other, pushing my heart to and fro. Time passed by. I 'delayed turning to the Lord' and postponed 'from day to day' (Ecclus. 5: 8) finding life in you. I did not postpone the fact that every day I was dying within myself. I longed for the happy life, but was afraid of the place where it has its seat, and fled from it at the same time as I was seeking for it. I thought I would become very miserable if I were deprived of the embraces of a woman. I did not think the medicine of your mercy could heal that infirmity because I had not tried it. I believed continence to be achieved by personal resources which I was not aware of possessing. I was so stupid as not to know that, as it is written (Wisd. 8: 21), 'no one can be continent unless you grant it'. You would surely have granted it if my inward groaning had struck your ears and with firm faith I had cast my care on you.

xii (21) Alypius discouraged me from marrying a wife. His theme was that, if I did that, there would be no way whereby we could live together in carefree leisure for the love of wisdom, as we had long desired. In this matter he was himself by that time a person of complete chastity in a way that surprised me. In his early adolescence he had had an initial experience of sexual intercourse, but he had not continued with it. Rather had he felt revulsion for it and despised it, and thereafter lived in total continence. I resisted him by appealing to the examples of those who, though married, had cultivated wisdom and pleased God and kept loyal and loving friendships. I was much inferior to them in greatness of soul.

¹⁵ Necessary for donors to influential court officials to fix the appointment, all important public offices at this period being up for sale. Distinction in rhetoric was generally regarded as a qualification for public office, and the axiom was seldom disputed (an exception being Gregory of Nazianzus who thought it ludicrous, *Orat.* 4: 43). But money was also required.

Fettered by the flesh's morbid impulse and lethal sweetness, I dragged my chain, but was afraid to be free of it. Like a man whose wound has been hit, I pushed aside the words of good advice like the hand loosing the bond. Over and beyond this, my words to Alypius were the serpent's persuasions, using my tongue to weave and scatter sweet snares in his path to entrap his honest and unfettered feet.

(22) He was astonished that I, for whom he had so deep a regard, should be stuck fast in the glue of this pleasure. Whenever we argued on this subject among ourselves, I used to assert that it was out of my power to live a celibate life. I defended myself when I saw his amazement, and used to say that there was a vast difference between his hurried and furtive experience, which he could now hardly remember and so could easily despise without the least difficulty, and the delights of my own regular habit. If the honourable name of marriage had been added to my life, he would have had no reason to be surprised that I could not despise married life. So he himself began to desire marriage, overcome by curiosity, not in the least by lust for sexual pleasure. He used to say that he wanted to know what it was without which my life, which met with his approval, would have seemed to me not life but torture. His mind being free of that chain was astonished at my bondage, and from amazement he passed into desire to experience it. From there perhaps he would have lapsed into that bondage which surprised him, since he wanted to make 'a pact with death' (Isa. 28: 18) and 'he who loves danger' will fall into it (Ecclus. 3: 27).

Neither of us considered it more than a marginal issue how the beauty of having a wife lies in the obligation to respect the discipline of marriage and bring up children. To a large extent what held me captive and tortured me was the habit of satisfying with vehement intensity an insatiable sexual desire. In his case astonishment drew him towards captivity. That is how we were until you, most high, not deserting our clay, had mercy on us poor wretches, and by wonderful and secret ways came to our aid.

xiii (23) Pressure to have me married was not relaxed. Already I submitted my suit, and already a girl was promised to me principally through my mother's efforts. Her hope was that once married I would be washed in the saving water of baptism. Every day she

rejoiced to find me more prepared to consider it, and she saw her vows and your promises fulfilled in my faith.

At my request and at her own desire she petitioned you every day with a strong cry from her heart, that by a vision you would show her what was to happen after my coming marriage. But you never will to grant this. She saw certain illusory and fantastic images, the product of the human spirit's efforts in its urgent concern for an answer. The account which she gave me was not marked by the confidence she normally showed when you disclosed the future to her, but she spoke contemptuously of what she saw. She used to say that, by a certain small indescribable in words,¹⁶ she could tell the difference between your revelation and her own soul dreaming. Nevertheless, pressure for the marriage continued, and the girl who was asked for was almost two years under age for marriage.¹⁷ But she pleased me, and I was prepared to wait.

xiv (24) Among our group of friends we had had animated discussions of a project: talking with one another we expressed detestation for the storms and troubles of human life, and had almost decided on withdrawing from the crowds and living a life of contemplation. This contemplative leisure we proposed to organize in the following way: everything that we could raise we would put into a common treasury and from everyone's resources would create a single household chest. In sincere friendship nothing would be the private property of this or that individual, but out of the resources of all one treasury would be formed; the whole would belong to each, and everything would belong to everybody. We saw that we could have about ten people in the same community. Some among us were extremely rich, above all Romanians from our home town, who at this time had had to come to the court because of serious problems connected with his property. From my earliest years he had been a most intimate friend. He gave important support to this proposal and had great persuasive influence because his financial resources were much greater than anyone else's.

We decided that two of us, appointed like magistrates to serve for

¹⁶ In Augustine's age it was common belief that evil spirits caused an unpleasant odour (e.g. *City of God* 10. 19).

¹⁷ Under Roman law the minimum age was 12. Augustine ascribes here to Monica moral and religious reasons for fostering the marriage rather than his need to marry money to achieve his secular ambitions, mentioned above VI. xi (19).

one year,¹⁸ should be responsible for all the necessary business, leaving the others free of cares. But later the thought began to occur to us whether this would be acceptable to the wives whom others among us already had, and which we ourselves wanted to acquire.

On this the entire project which we had so well planned collapsed in our hands; it was broken up and abandoned.¹⁹ Thereupon we returned to sighs and groans and careers following the broad and well-trodden ways of the world. 'Many thoughts were in our heart, but your counsel abides for ever' (Prov. 19: 21; Ps. 32: 11). By that counsel you laughed at our proposals and prepared your own dispositions, to 'give us meat in due season', 'to open your hand and fill our souls with blessing' (Ps. 144: 15 f.).

xv (25) Meanwhile my sins multiplied. The woman with whom I habitually slept was torn away from my side because she was a hindrance to my marriage. My heart which was deeply attached was cut and wounded, and left a trail of blood. She had returned to Africa vowing that she would never go with another man. She left with me the natural son I had by her. But I was unhappy, incapable of following a woman's example, and impatient of delay. I was to get the girl I had proposed to only at the end of two years. As I was not a lover of marriage but a slave of lust, I procured another woman, not of course as wife. By this liaison the disease of my soul would be sustained and kept active, either in full vigour or even increased, so that the habit would be guarded and fostered until I came to the kingdom of marriage. But my wound, inflicted by the earlier parting, was not healed. After inflammation and sharp pain, it festered. The pain made me as it were frigid but desperate.

xvi (26) Praise to you, glory to you, fount of mercies! As I became unhappier, you came closer. Your right hand was by me, already prepared to snatch me out of the filth (Jer. 28: 13), and to clean me up. But I did not know it. Nothing kept me from an even deeper whirlpool of erotic indulgence except fear of death and of your coming judgement which, through the various opinions I had held, never left my breast. With my friends Alypius and Nebridius I discussed the ultimate nature of good and evil.²⁰ To my mind

¹⁸ Quietist groups of Neopythagoreans had comparable arrangements.

¹⁹ When Augustine was in association with the Manichees in Rome, one named Constantius formed an ascetic community in his house, but it split up.

²⁰ Evidently based on Cicero, *De finibus* (1. 12. 40) echoed in the following words.

Epicurus would have been awarded the palm of victory, had I not believed that after death the life of the soul remains with the consequences of our acts, a belief which Epicurus rejected; and I asked: If we were immortal and lived in unending bodily pleasure, with no fear of losing it, why should we not be happy? What else should we be seeking for? I did not realize that that is exactly what shows our great wretchedness. For I was so submerged and blinded that I could not think of the light of moral goodness and of a beauty to be embraced for its own sake—beauty seen not by the eye of the flesh, but only by inward discernment.

In my sombre state I did not consider from what fountain came the flow of delightful conversation with friends (though on such sordid subjects), nor the fact that without friends I could not be happy even when my mind was at the time a flood of indulgence in physical pleasures.²¹ My friends I loved indeed for their own sake; and I felt that in return they loved me for my sake.

What tortuous paths! How fearful a fate for 'the rash soul' (Isa. 3: 9) which nursed the hope that after it had departed from you, it would find something better! Turned this way and that, on its back, on its side, on its stomach, all positions are uncomfortable. You alone are repose.

You are present, liberating us from miserable errors, and you put us on your way, bringing comfort and saying: 'Run, I will carry you, and I will see you through to the end, and there I will carry you' (Isa. 46: 4).

²¹ The latent underlying contrast is between the treatment of human beings as means and as ends.