

BOOK VIII

The Birthpangs of Conversion

i (1) My God, in my thanksgiving I want to recall and confess your mercies over me. Let my bones be penetrated by your love (Ps. 85: 13) and say, 'Lord who is like you?' (Ps. 34: 10). 'You have broken my chains, I will sacrifice to you the sacrifice of praise' (Ps. 115: 16-17). I will tell how you broke them. Let all who adore you say when they hear these things: 'Blessed is the Lord in heaven and in earth; great and wonderful is his name' (Ps. 71: 18-19; 134: 6).

Your words stuck fast in my heart and on all sides I was defended by you. Of your eternal life I was certain, though I saw it 'in an enigma and as if in a mirror' (1 Cor. 13: 12). All doubt had been taken from me that there is indestructible substance from which comes all substance. My desire was not to be more certain of you but to be more stable in you. But in my temporal life everything was in a state of uncertainty, and my heart needed to be purified from the old leaven (1 Cor. 5: 7 f.). I was attracted to the way, the Saviour himself, but was still reluctant to go along its narrow paths. And you put into my heart, and it seemed good in my sight (Ps. 18: 15), that I should visit Simplicianus.¹ It was evident to me that he was a good servant of yours; your grace shone in him. I had also heard that from his youth he had lived a life dedicated to you. By this time he had become an old man, and after a long life of saintly zeal in pursuing your way he appeared to me a man of much experience and much learning. So indeed he was. Accordingly, I wanted to consult with him about my troubles, so that he could propose a method fitted for someone in my disturbed condition, whereby I could learn to walk in your way.

(2) I saw the Church full, with one going this way, another a different way.² My secular activity I held in disgust, and now that I was not burning with my old ambitions in hope of honour and

¹ Simplicianus succeeded Ambrose as bishop of Milan in 397 and died c.400; so he was still living when the *Confessions* were published.

² 1 Cor. 7: 7 (of married and unmarried). Augustine means that the Church included both married and unmarried believers (a marked difference from Manicheism).

money it was burdensome to me to tolerate so heavy a servitude. By now those prizes gave me no pleasure in comparison with your gentleness and 'the beauty of your house which I loved' (Ps. 25: 8). But I was still firmly tied by woman. The apostle did not forbid ^{your} to marry, though he exhorted me to something better and very much wished that all men were as unattached as he himself. But I was instant in other respects and was wasting away with nagging anxieties. Moreover, there were other matters which were a tiresome distraction to me, but which I was compelled to put up with because they go with married life; once tied by that, I was restricted. From the mouth of truth I had heard that there are 'eunuchs who have castrated themselves for the kingdom of heaven's sake'. But, he says, 'let him who can accept this accept it' (Matt. 19: 12).

'Assuredly all men are vain in whom there is no knowledge of God; not even from the things which appear good can they find him who is' (Wisd. 13: 1). But now I was not in vanity of that kind. I had climbed beyond it, and by the witness of all creation I had found you our Creator and your Word who is God beside you and with you is one God, by whom you created all things (John 1: 1–3).

There are impious people of another sort who 'not knowing God, have not glorified him as God nor given thanks' (Rom. 1: 21). In this respect also I had fallen; but 'your right hand sustained me' (Ps. 17: 36). You took me thence and placed me where I could recover my strength. For you said to man 'Behold piety is wisdom', and 'Do not wish to appear wise' (Job 28: 28; Prov. 26: 5). 'Those who asserted themselves to be wise have been made foolish' (Rom. 1: 22).

And now I had discovered the good pearl. To buy it I had to sell all that I had; and I hesitated (Matt. 13: 46).

ii (3) So I visited Simplicianus, father to the then bishop Ambrose in the receiving of grace.³ Ambrose truly loved him as one loves a

³ Simplicianus, at one time in Rome, moved to Milan and was the senior priest nominated to be bishop of Milan. In Rome Simplicianus knew Marius Victorinus, a rhetor of African origin, who embodied the ideal of high culture, writing (extant) books on grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic, translating some of Aristotle's logic, and presenting prologue to St John's gospel, and could count himself a Christian fellow-traveller. After conversion in his seventies, his writings on Christian theology tend to present the faith as a kind of Platonism for the masses.

father. I told him the story of my wanderings in error. But when I mentioned that I had read some books of the Platonists, which had been translated into Latin by Victorinus, at one time rhetor in the city of Rome who had, I had heard, died a Christian, he congratulated me that I had not fallen in with the writings of other philosophers full of fallacies and deceptions 'according to the elements of this world' (Col. 2: 8), whereas in all the Platonic books God and his Word keep slipping in. Then, to exhort me to the humility of Christ hidden from the wise and revealed to babes (Matt. 11: 25) he recalled his memory of Victorinus himself, whom he had known intimately when he was at Rome. He told me a story about him which I will not pass over in silence. For the story gives occasion for me to confess to you in great praise for your grace.

Victorinus was extremely learned and most expert in all the liberal disciplines. He had read and assessed many philosophers' ideas, and was tutor to numerous noble senators. To mark the distinguished quality of his teaching he was offered and accepted a statue in the Roman forum, an honour which the citizens of this world think supreme.⁴ Until he was of advanced years, he was a worshipper of idols and took part in sacrilegious rites. At that time almost all the Roman nobility was enthusiastic for the cult of Osiris⁵ and 'Monstrous gods of every kind and Anubis the barking dog, Monsters who once bore arms against Neptune and Venus and against Minerva' (Virgil, *Aeneid* 8. 698 f.), gods that Rome once conquered but then implored for aid. The old Victorinus had defended these cults for many years with a voice terrifying to opponents. Yet he was not ashamed to become the servant of your Christ, and an infant born at your font, to bow his head to the yoke of humility and to submit his forehead to the reproach of the cross.⁶

(4) Lord God, 'you have inclined the heavens and come down, you have touched the mountains and they have smoked' (Ps. 143: 5).⁷ By what ways did you make an opening into that heart? Simplicianus

⁴ Jerome says the statue was in the Forum of Trajan.

⁵ The Latin text has a corruption here; the translation above has a little manuscript support, but cannot claim to offer more than a guess at the general sense.

⁶ The sign of the cross on the forehead in baptism.

⁷ Augustine (*Sermon on Ps. 143*) interprets the 'inclined heavens' to mean the apostles who, when people wanted to honour them as gods, humbly pointed them to the true God; the 'mountains' are the proud, and 'smoke' when, at God's touch, they confess their sins (like Victorinus).

said Victorinus read holy scripture, and all the Christian books he investigated with special care. After examining them he said to Simplicianus, not openly but in the privacy of friendship, 'Did you know that I am already a Christian?' Simplicianus replied: 'I shall not believe that or count you among the Christians unless I see you in the Church of Christ.' Victorinus laughed and said: 'Then do walls make Christians?' He used frequently to say 'I am a Christian already', and Simplicianus would give the same answer, to which he equally often repeated his joke about walls. He was afraid to offend his friends, proud devil-worshippers. He thought that from the height of Babylonish dignity, as if from the cedars of Lebanon which the Lord had not yet broken (Ps. 28: 5), the full weight of their hostility would land on him. But after his reading, he began to feel a longing and drank in courage. He was afraid he would be 'denied' by Christ 'before the holy angels' (Luke 12: 9). He would have felt guilty of a grave crime if he were ashamed of the mysteries of the humility of your Word and were not ashamed of the sacrilegious rites of proud demons, whose pride he imitated when he accepted their ceremonies. He became ashamed of the emptiness of those rites and felt respect for the truth. Suddenly and unexpectedly he said to Simplicianus (as he told me): 'Let us go to the Church; I want to become a Christian.' Simplicianus was unable to contain himself for joy and went with him. Not long after he had received his instructions in the first mysteries, he gave in his name for baptism that he might be reborn, to the amazement of Rome and the joy of the Church. The proud 'saw and were angry. They gnashed with their teeth and were sick at heart' (Ps. 111: 10). But the Lord God was the hope of his servant; 'he paid no regard to vanities and lying follies' (Ps. 39: 5).

(5) Finally the hour came for him to make the profession of faith which is expressed in set form. At Rome these words are memorized and then by custom recited from an elevated place before the baptized believers by those who want to come to your grace. Simplicianus used to say that the presbyters offered him the opportunity of affirming the creed in private, as was their custom to offer to people who felt embarrassed and afraid. But he preferred to make profession of his salvation before the holy congregation. For there was no salvation in the rhetoric which he had taught; yet his profession of

that had been public. How much less should he be afraid in proclaiming your word, when he used to feel no fear in using his own words before crowds of frenzied pagans. When he mounted the steps to affirm the confession of faith, there was a murmur of delighted talk as all the people who knew him spoke his name to one another. And who there did not know him? A suppressed sound came from the lips of all as they rejoiced, 'Victorinus, one another. And who there did not know him? A suppressed sound came from the lips of all as they rejoiced, 'Victorinus, Victorinus!' As soon as they saw him, they suddenly murmured in exaltation and equally suddenly were silent in concentration to hear him. He proclaimed his unfeigned faith with ringing assurance. All of them wanted to clasp him to their hearts, and the hands with which they embraced him were their love and their joy.

iii (6) God of goodness, what causes man to be more delighted by the salvation of a soul who is despaired of but is then liberated from great danger than if there has always been hope or if the danger has only been minor? You also, merciful Father, rejoice 'more over one penitent than over ninety-nine just persons who need no penitence' (Luke 15: 4). We too experience great pleasure when we hear how the shepherd's shoulders exult when they carry the lost sheep, and as we listen to the story of the drachma restored to your treasures while the neighbours rejoice with the woman who found it. Tears flow at the joy of the solemnities of your house (Ps. 25: 8) when in your house the story is read of your younger son 'who was dead and is alive again, was lost and has been found' (Luke 15: 32). You rejoice indeed in us and in your angels who are holy in holy love. You are always the same, and you always know unchangeably the things which are not always the same.⁸

(7) What then is it in the soul which causes it to take more pleasure in things which it loves when they are found and recovered than if it has always had them? There are other examples which attest this fact, and everyday life is full of instances where the evidence cries out: 'That is the case.' A victorious emperor celebrates a triumph. He would not have conquered if he had not fought. The greater the danger in the battle, the greater the joy in the triumph. A storm throws people about on a voyage and threatens shipwreck. All grow pale at the imminence of death. Sky and sea become calm, and the relief is great because the fear has been great. A dear

⁸ It is a Neoplatonic axiom that the immutable and eternal deity knows mutable and temporal things with a transcendent and immutable knowing.

person is sick, and his pulse reveals he is in a serious condition. All who wish him to recover his health feel sick in mind at the same time. He takes a turn for the better and, although he may not walk with his former strength, yet now there is joy as there was not before when he walked in good health and strength. Human beings unexpectedly and against our will, but after discomforts which are planned and accepted by deliberate choice. There is no pleasure in eating and drinking unless they are preceded by the unpleasant sensation of hunger and thirst. Drunkards eat salty things to make their desire uncomfortable. As drinking extinguishes the desire, there is delightful sensation. It is established custom that betrothed girls are not immediately handed over, lest the husband hold the bride being given to him to be cheaply gained if he has not sighed after her, impatient at the delay.

(8) The same phenomenon appears in acts which are demeaning and execrable, in acts which are allowed and lawful, in the sincerest expressions of honourable friendship, and in the case of the one 'who was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found' (Luke 15: 32). In every case the joy is greater, the worse the pain which has preceded it. Why is this, Lord my God? You are eternal to yourself, you are your own joy; and beings round you continually rejoice in your society. Why is it that this part of the creation alternates between regress and progress, between hostilities and reconciliations? Or is that a restriction placed on them, a limit you have imposed, when 'from the highest heaven' (Ps. 112: 4) down to the lowest things on earth, from the beginning to the end of the ages, from an angel down to a worm, from the first movement down to the last, you have assigned to its proper place and time all kinds of good things and all your just works?

You are so high among the highest, and I am low among the lowest, a mean thing. You never go away from us. Yet we have difficulty in returning to you.

iv (9) Come Lord, stir us up and call us back, kindle and seize us, be our fire and our sweetness. Let us love, let us run. Surely many return to you from a deeper hell of blindness than Victorinus. They approach and are illuminated as they receive light. Those who receive it obtain from you power to become your sons' (John 1: 9, 12). But if

they are less well known to the people, there is less rejoicing over them even among those who know them. When many share in the joy, individuals also feel a richer delight. They kindle excitement among themselves and are inflamed by one another. Then those who are known to many are to many a personal influence towards salvation. Where they lead, many will follow. That is why on their account even those who have preceded them feel great joy; for their rejoicing is not only for them.

But God forbid that in your tabernacle the rich be preferred to the poor or the noble to those of low origin. You have chosen in preference the weak things of the world to confound the powerful, and you have chosen the low of this world and things that are despised and things which have no existence as if they had being, to bring to nothing things which have being. (1 Cor. 1: 27 f.). Yet the very same writer, the least of your apostles (1 Cor. 15: 9), by whose tongue you uttered those words, was the person who by combat humbled the pride of Paul the proconsul under the gentle yoke of your Christ, and commissioned him as a provincial governor of the great king (Acts 13: 7–12). Thereafter he himself, formerly named Saul, loved to be called Paul as a reminder of that great victory. The enemy suffers a severer defeat when he is overcome in a man upon whom he has a greater hold and by whose influence he dominates many. Pride in aristocratic nobility enables him to hold sway especially over the upper class, and by their title and authority he dominates many more. Special pleasure, therefore, was felt at the conversion of Victorinus' heart in which the devil had an impregnable fortress, and of Victorinus' tongue which he had used as a mighty and sharp dart to destroy many. Your children had good reason to rejoice the more jubilantly because our king had bound the strong man (Matt. 12: 29), and they saw his vessels being snatched away to be cleaned and made fit for your honour to be 'useful to the Lord for every good work' (2 Tim. 2: 21).

v (10) As soon as your servant Simplicianus told me this story about Victorinus, I was ardent to follow his example. He had indeed told it to me with this object in view. Later on, he added, in the time of the emperor Julian when a law was promulgated forbidding Christians to teach literature and rhetoric,⁹ Victorinus welcomed

⁹ Julian's edict of 17 June 362 was based on the presupposition (shared by pagan Christians) that pagan literature and pagan religion are indissoluble. Christians such as

the law and preferred to abandon the school of loquacious chattering rather than your word, by which you make 'skilled the tongues of infants' (Wisd. 10: 21). I felt that he was not so much courageous as fortunate to find occasion for dedicating all his time to you. I sighed after such freedom, but was bound not by an iron imposed by anyone else but by the iron of my own choice. The enemy had a grip on my will and so made a chain for me to hold me a prisoner. The consequence of a distorted will is passion. By servitude to passion, habit is formed, and habit to which there is no resistance becomes necessity. By these links, as it were, connected one to another (hence my term a chain), a harsh bondage held me under restraint. The new will, which was beginning to be within me a will to serve you freely and to enjoy you, God, the only sure source of pleasure, was not yet strong enough to conquer my older will, which had the strength of old habit. So my two wills, one old, the other new, one carnal, the other spiritual, were in conflict with one another, and their discord robbed my soul of all concentration.

(11) In this way I understood through my own experience what I had read, how 'the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh' (Gal. 5: 17). I was split between them, but more of me was in that which I approved in myself than in that which I disapproved. In the latter case it was 'no more I' (Rom. 7: 17), since in large part I was passive and unwilling rather than active and willing. But I was responsible for the fact that habit had become so embattled against me; for it was with my consent that I came to the place in which I did not wish to be. Who has the right to object if a just penalty pursues a sinner? I no longer had my usual excuse to explain why I did not yet despise the world and serve you, namely, that my perception of the truth was uncertain. By now I was indeed quite sure about it. Yet I was still bound down to the earth. I was refusing to become your soldier,¹⁰ and I was as afraid of being rid of all my burdens as I ought to have been at the prospect of carrying them.

Gregory of Nazianzus resented it. The admiring pagan Ammianus Marcellinus thought it should be condemned to everlasting silence as disgraceful. At Athens the famous sophist Prohaeretus declined to accept the special exemption granted him by Julian and, like Victorinus at Rome, resigned. Augustine himself (*City of God* 18, 52) thought the edict an act of persecuting intolerance.

¹⁰ From Tertullian on (AD 200), Latin Christians spoke of baptism in military terms as enlistment in Christ's army by an oath (*sacramentum*), with the cross as the standard (*vexillum, signum*) and the sign of the cross over the forehead.

(12) The burden of the world weighed me down with a sweet drowsiness such as commonly occurs during sleep. The thoughts with which I meditated about you were like the efforts of those who would like to get up but are overcome by deep sleep and sink back again. No one wants to be asleep all the time, and the sane judgement of everyone judges it better to be awake. Yet often a man defers shaking off sleep when his limbs are heavy with slumber. Although displeased with himself he is glad to take a bit longer, even when the time to get up has arrived. In this kind of way I was sure it was better for me to render myself up to your love than to surrender to my own cupidity. But while the former course was pleasant and about and had my notional assent, the latter was more pleasant and overcame me. I had no answer to make to you when you said to me 'Arise, you who are asleep, rise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light' (Eph. 5: 14). Though at every point you showed that what you were saying was true, yet I, convinced by that truth, had no answer to give you except merely slow and sleepy words: 'At once'—'But presently'—'Just a little longer, please'. But 'At once, at once' never came to the point of decision, and 'Just a little longer, please' went on and on for a long while. In vain I 'delighted in your law in respect of the inward man; but another law in my members fought against the law of my mind and led me captive in the law of sin which was in my members' (Rom. 7: 22). The law of sin is the violence of habit by which even the unwilling mind is dragged down and held, as it deserves to be, since by its own choice it slipped into the habit. 'Wretched man that I was, who would deliver me from this body of death other than your grace through Jesus Christ our Lord?' (Rom. 7: 24–5).

vi (13) Lord, my helper and redeemer, I will now tell the story, and confess to your name, of the way in which you delivered me from the chain of sexual desire, by which I was tightly bound, and from the slavery of worldly affairs. I went about my usual routine in a state of mental anxiety. Every day I sighed after you. I used to frequent your Church whenever I had time off from the affairs under whose weight I was groaning. With me was Alypius, unemployed in his work as a lawyer after a third period as assessor and waiting for someone else to whom he could again sell his advice, just as I was selling the art of public speaking—if oratory is something that can

be conveyed by teaching. Nebriidius, however, had yielded to the pressure of his friendship with us and was assistant teacher to Verecundus, a close friend to all of us, a citizen of Milan and instructor in literature there. Verecundus was in urgent need of reliable assistance, and by right of friendship claimed from our group the supply he badly wanted. So Nebriidius was not attracted to this work by desire for the profits; for had he so wished, he could have made more money on his own as teacher of literature. He was a most gentle and kind friend, and recognizing the duty of generosity and would not scorn our request. He performed his task most prudently, and took care not to become known to important people, as this world reckons them, so avoiding anything likely to distract his mind. He wanted to keep his mind free and to devote as many hours as possible to the pursuit of wisdom by investigating some problem or listening to conversation.

(14) One day when Nebriidius was absent for a reason I cannot recall, Alypius and I received a surprise visit at home from a man named Ponticianus, a compatriot in that he was an African, holding high office at the court. He wanted something or other from us. We sat down together to converse. By chance he noticed a book on top of a gaming table which lay before us. He picked it up, opened it, and discovered, much to his astonishment, that it was the apostle Paul. He had expected it to be one of the books used for the profession which was wearing me out. But then he smiled and had suddenly discovered this book and this book alone open before my eyes. He was a Christian and a baptized believer. He often prostrated himself before you, our God, at the Church with frequent and long times of prayer. When I had indicated to him that those scriptures were the subject of deep study for me, a conversation began in which he told the story of Antony the Egyptian monk, a name held in high honour among your servants, though up to that moment Alypius and I had never heard of him. When he discovered this, he dwelt on the story instilling in us who were ignorant an awareness of the man's greatness, and expressing astonishment that we did not know of him. We were amazed as we heard of your wonderful acts very well attested and occurring so recently, almost in our own time, done in orthodox faith and in the Catholic

Church. All of us were in a state of surprise, we because of the greatness of the story, he because we had not heard about it.

(15) From there his conversation moved on to speak of the flocks in the monasteries and their manner of life well pleasing to you and the fertile deserts of the wilderness. Of these we knew nothing. There was a monastery full of good brothers at Milan outside the city walls, fostered by Ambrose, and we had not known of it. He developed the theme and talked on while we listened with rapt silence. Then it occurred to him to mention how he and three of his colleagues (the date I do not know but it was at Trier), when the emperor was detained by a circus spectacle in the forenoon, went out for a walk in the gardens adjacent to the walls. There they strolled in couples, one as it turned out with Ponticianus, the other two separately wandering off on their own. In their wanderings they happened on a certain house where there lived some of your servants, poor in spirit: 'of such is the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 5: 3). They found there a book in which was written the Life of Antony.¹¹ One of them began to read it. He was amazed and set on fire, and during his reading began to think of taking up this way of life and of leaving his secular post in the civil service to be your servant. For they were agents in the special branch.¹² Suddenly he was filled with holy love and sobering shame. Angry with himself, he turned his eyes on his friend and said to him: 'Tell me, I beg of you, what do we hope to achieve with all our labours? What is our aim in life? What is the motive of our service to the state? Can we hope for any higher office in the palace than to be Friends of the Emperor? And in that position what is not fragile and full of dangers? How many hazards must one risk to attain to a position of even greater danger? And when will we arrive there? Whereas, if I wish to become God's friend, in an instant I may become that now.' So he spoke, and in

¹¹ Antony's Life by Athanasius of Alexandria was translated into Latin by Evagrius of Antioch, a friend of Jerome, about 371; an earlier version was also in circulation.

¹² *Agentes in rebus* were an inspectorate of the imperial bureaucracy, sometimes used as intelligence gatherers and secret police, but mainly responsible to the Master of the Offices (who was among other things head of the intelligence service) for the operation of the *cursus publicus* or government communications system. Promotion in this department could lead as high as a provincial governorship, though this was rare. 'Friends of the Emperor' were not a branch of the civil service, but honoured individuals in high office; in the later Roman Empire all high office holders were vulnerable to palace revolutions and conspiracies.

pain at the coming to birth of new life, he returned his eyes to the book's pages. He read on and experienced a conversion inwardly where you alone could see and, as was soon evident, his mind rid the turbulent hesitations of his heart, there were some moments when he was angry with himself. But then he perceived the choice to be made and took a decision to follow the better course. He was already yours, and said to his friend: 'As for myself, I have broken away from our ambition, and have decided to serve God, and I propose to start doing that from this hour in this place. If it costs you too much to follow my example, do not turn against me.' His friend replied that he would join him and be associated with him for such great reward and for so great a service. And both men, already yours, were building their tower at the right cost of forsaking all their property and following you (Luke 14: 28). Then Ponticianus and his companion who were walking through other parts of the garden in search of them, came to the same place and, on finding them, suggested returning home since the daylight had already begun to fade. But they told him of their decision and purpose, and how this intention had started and had become a firm resolve. They begged the others, if they did not wish to be associated with them, not to obstruct them. Ponticianus and his friend, however, did not change from their old career; nevertheless, as he told us, they wept for themselves. They offered their friends devout congratulations, and commended themselves to their prayers. Then, dragging their hearts along the ground, they went off into the palace. The others fixed their hearts on heaven and stayed at the house. Both had fiancées. When later their fiancées heard this, they also dedicated their virginity to you.

vii (16) This was the story Ponticianus told. But while he was speaking, Lord, you turned my attention back to myself. You took me up from behind my own back where I had placed myself because I did not wish to observe myself (Ps. 20: 13), and you set me before my face (Ps. 49: 21) so that I should see how vile I was, how twisted and filthy, covered in sores and ulcers.¹³ And I looked and was appalled, but there was no way of escaping from myself. If I

¹³ Echo of Seneca, *De Ira* 2. 36. 1.

and you once again placed me in front of myself; you thrust me and you own eyes so that I should discover my iniquity and hate before my own eyes it, but deceived myself, refused to admit it, and it. I had known it, but deceived myself, refused to admit it, and pushed it out of my mind.

(17) But at that moment the more ardent my affection for those young men of whom I was hearing, who for the soul's health had given themselves wholly to you for healing, the more was the detestation and hatred I felt for myself in comparison with them. Many years of my life had passed by—about twelve—since in my nineteenth year I had read Cicero's *Hortensius*, and had been stirred to a zeal for wisdom. But although I came to despise earthly success, I put off giving time to the quest for wisdom. For 'it is not the discovery but the mere search for wisdom which should be preferred even to the discovery of treasures and to ruling over nations and to the physical delights available to me at a nod.'¹⁴ But I was an unhappy young man, wretched as at the beginning of my adolescence when I prayed you for chastity and said: 'Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.' I was afraid you might hear my prayer quickly, and that you might too rapidly heal me of the disease of lust which I preferred to satisfy rather than suppress. I had gone along 'evil ways' (Ecclus. 2: 10) with a sacrilegious superstition, not indeed because I felt sure of its truth but because I preferred it to the alternatives, which I did not investigate in a devout spirit but opposed in an attitude of hostility.

(18) I supposed that the reason for my postponing 'from day to day' (Ecclus. 5: 8) the moment when I would despise worldly ambition and follow you was that I had not seen any certainty by which to direct my course. But the day had now come when I stood naked to myself, and my conscience complained against me: 'Where is your tongue? You were saying that, because the truth is uncertain, you do not want to abandon the burden of futility. But look, it is certain now, and the burden still presses on you. Yet wings are won by the freer shoulders of men who have not been exhausted by their searching and have not taken ten years or more to meditate on these matters.' This is how I was gnawing at my inner self. I was violently overcome by a fearful sense of shame during the time that

¹⁴ A quotation or at least paraphrase of Cicero (*Hortensius*, fragment 106 Grillo). Cf. XII. i (1) below.

Ponticianus was telling his story. When he had ended his talk and settled the matter for which he came, he went home and I was left to myself. What accusations against myself did I not bring? With what verbal rods did I not scourge my soul so that it would follow me in my attempt to go after you! But my soul hung back. It refused, and had no excuse to offer. The arguments were exhausted, and all had been refuted. The only thing left to it was a mute trembling, and as if it were facing death it was terrified of being restrained from the treadmill of habit by which it suffered 'sickness unto death' (John 11: 4).

viii (19) Then in the middle of that grand struggle in my inner house, which I had vehemently stirred up with my soul in the intimate chamber of my heart, distressed not only in mind but in appearance, I turned on Alypius and cried out: 'What is wrong with us? What is this that you have heard? Uneducated people are rising up and capturing heaven (Matt. 11: 12), and we with our high culture without any heart—see where we roll in the mud of flesh and blood. Is it because they are ahead of us that we are ashamed to follow? Do we feel no shame at making not even an attempt to follow?' That is the gist of what I said, and the heat of my passion took my attention away from him as he contemplated my condition in astonished silence. For I sounded very strange. My uttered words said less about the state of my mind than my forehead, cheeks, eyes, colour, and tone of voice.

Our lodging had a garden. We had the use of it as well as of the entire house, for our host, the owner of the house, was not living there. The tumult of my heart took me out into the garden where no one could interfere with the burning struggle with myself in which I was engaged, until the matter could be settled. You knew, but I did not, what the outcome would be. But my madness with myself was part of the process of recovering health, and in the agony of death I was coming to life. I was aware how ill I was, unaware how well I was soon to be. So I went out into the garden. Alypius followed me step after step. Although he was present, I felt no intrusion on my solitude. How could he abandon me in such a state? We sat down as far as we could from the buildings. I was deeply disturbed in spirit, angry with indignation and distress that I was not entering into my pact and covenant with you, my God, when all my bones (Ps. 34: 10) were crying out that I should enter

into it and were exalting it to heaven with praises. But to reach that destination one does not use ships or chariots or feet.¹⁵ It was not even necessary to go the distance I had come from the house to where we were sitting. The one necessary condition, which meant not only going but at once arriving there, was to have the will to go—provided only that the will was strong and unqualified, not the turning and twisting first this way, then that, of a will half-wounded, struggling with one part rising up and the other part falling down.

(20) Finally in the agony of hesitation I made many physical gestures of the kind men make when they want to achieve something and lack the strength, either because they lack the actual limbs or because their limbs are fettered with chains or weak with sickness or in some way hindered. If I tore my hair, if I struck my forehead, if I intertwined my fingers and clasped my knee, I did that because to do so was my will. But I could have willed this and then not done it if my limbs had not possessed the power to obey. So I did many actions in which the will to act was not equalled by the power. Yet I was not doing what with an incomparably greater longing I yearned to do, and could have done the moment I so resolved. For as soon as I had the will, I would have had a wholehearted will. At this point the power to act is identical with the will. The willing itself was the performative of the action. Nevertheless, it did not happen. The body obeyed the slightest inclination of the soul to move the limbs at its pleasure more easily than the soul obeyed itself, when its supreme desire could be achieved exclusively by the will alone.

ix (21) What is the cause of this monstrous situation? Why is it the case? May your mercy illuminate me as I ask if perhaps an answer can be found in the hidden punishments and secret tribulations that befall the sons of Adam? What causes this monstrous fact? and why is it so? The mind commands the body and is instantly obeyed. The mind commands itself and meets resistance. The mind commands the hand to move, and it is so easy that one hardly distinguishes the order from its execution. Yet mind is mind, and hand is body. The mind orders the mind to will. The recipient of the order is itself, yet it does not perform it. What causes this monstrosity and why does this happen? Mind commands, I say, that it should will, and would

¹⁵ Echo of Plotinus 1. 6. 8. 21.

not give the command if it did not will, yet does not perform what it commands. The willing is not wholehearted, so the command is not wholehearted. The strength of the command lies in the strength of the will, and the degree to which the command is not performed lies in the degree to which the will is not engaged. For it is the will that commands the will to exist, and it commands not another will but itself. So the will that commands is incomplete, and therefore what it commands does not happen. If it were complete, it would not need to command the will to exist, since it would exist already. Therefore there is no monstrous split between willing and not willing. We are dealing with a morbid condition of the mind which, when it is lifted up by the truth, does not unreservedly rise to it but is weighed down by habit. So there are two wills. Neither of them is complete, and what is present in the one is lacking to the other.

x (22) 'Let them perish from your presence' (Ps. 67: 3) O God, as do 'empty talkers and seducers' of the mind (Titus 1: 10)¹⁶ who deduce that there are two minds with two distinct natures, one good, the other bad. They really are evil themselves when they entertain these evil doctrines. Yet the very same people would be good if they held to the true doctrines and assented to the truth. As your apostle says to them 'You were at one time darkness, but now are light in the Lord' (Eph. 5: 8). But they wish to be light not in the Lord but in themselves because they hold that the nature of the soul is what God is. They have in fact become a thicker darkness in that by their horrendous arrogance they have withdrawn further away from you—from you who are 'the true light illuminating every man coming into this world' (John 1: 9). They should give heed to what you say and blush: 'Come to him and be illuminated, and your faces will not blush' (Ps. 33: 6).

In my own case, as I deliberated about serving my Lord God (Jer. 30: 9) which I had long been disposed to do, the self which willed to serve was identical with the self which was unwilling. I was I. I was neither wholly willing nor wholly unwilling. It conflict with myself and was dissociated from myself. So I was in came about against my will. Yet this was not a manifestation of the nature of an alien mind but the punishment suffered in my own

¹⁶ Manichees.

mind. And so it was 'not I' that brought this about 'but sin which dwelt in me' (Rom. 7: 17, 20), sin resulting from the punishment of a more freely chosen sin, because I was a son of Adam.

(23) If there are as many contrary natures as there are wills in someone beset by indecision, there will be not two wills but many. If a person is deliberating whether to go to the Manichees' conventicle or to the theatre, they cry: 'Here are two natures, a good one leads one way, a bad one leads the other way. How otherwise explain the opposition of two wills to one another?' But I affirm that they are both evil, both the will to attend their meeting and the will to go to the theatre. They think that the intention to go along to them can only be good. What then? If one of us Catholic Christians were deliberating and, with two wills quarrelling with one another, fluctuated between going to the theatre or to our Church, surely the Manichees would be quite undecided what to say about that. Either they will have to concede that to go to our Church is an act of good will, as is the case with those worshippers who are initiated into its sacraments and feel the obligation thereby imposed, or they will have to think two evil natures and two evil minds are in conflict within a single person. This argument will prove untrue their usual assertion that one is good, the other bad. The alternative for them will be to be converted to the true view and not to deny that in the process of deliberation a single soul is wavering between different wills.

(24) Accordingly, when they note two wills in one person in conflict with each other, let them no more say that two conflicting minds are derived from two rival substances, and that two conflicting principles are in contention, one good, the other evil. God of truth, you condemn them and refute and confound them. For both wills are evil when someone is deliberating whether to kill a person by poison or by a dagger; whether to encroach on one estate belonging to someone else or a different one, when he cannot do both; whether to buy pleasure by lechery or avariciously to keep his money; whether to go to the circus or the theatre if both are putting on a performance on the same day, or (I add a third possibility) to steal from another person's house if occasion offers, or (I add a fourth option) to commit adultery if at the same time the chance is available. Suppose that all these choices are confronted at one moment of time, and all are equally desired, yet they cannot all be

done simultaneously. They tear the mind apart by the incompatibility of the wills—four or more according to the number of objects desired. Yet they do not usually affirm that there is the mutual multiplicity of diverse substances.

The same argument holds for good wills. For I ask them whether it is good to delight in a reading from the apostle, or if it is good to take pleasure in a sober psalm, or if it is good to discourse upon the gospel. In each case they will reply 'good'. What then? If all these wills pull apart the human heart while we are deliberating which is the most attractive option to take? All are good and yet are in contention with each other until the choice falls on one to which is then drawn the entire single will which was split into many. So also when the delight of eternity draws us upwards and the pleasure of temporal good holds us down, the identical soul is not wholehearted in its desire for one or the other. It is torn apart in a painful condition, as long as it prefers the eternal because of its truth but does not discard the temporal because of its truth but

xi (25) Such was my sickness and my torture, as I accused myself even more bitterly than usual. I was twisting and turning in my chain until it would break completely: I was now only a little bit held by it, but I was still held. You, Lord, put pressure on me in my hidden depths with a severe mercy wielding the double whip¹⁷ of fear and shame, lest I should again succumb, and lest that tiny and more regain strength and bind me even more firmly. Inwardly I said to myself: Let it be now, let it be now. And by this phrase I said already moving towards a decision; I had almost taken it, and then I did not do so.¹⁸ Yet I did not relapse into my original condition, but stood my ground very close to the point of deciding and recovered short of my goal; only a little short of it—yet I did not touch it or hold on to it. I was hesitating whether to die to death and to live to life. Ingrained evil had more hold over me than unaccustomed

¹⁷ Virgil, *Aeneid* 5: 547.

¹⁸ Petrus's fifth satire (quoted below VIII. xii (28)) portrays a lover who swears to give up his mistress but returns on her first appeal (5: 157). An epigram in the Greek Anthology (5: 24) concerns a lover whose conscience warns him to fly from his mistress but his will has not the strength.

good. The nearer approached the moment of time when I would become different, the greater the horror of it struck me. But it did not thrust me back nor turn me away, but left me in a state of suspense.

(26) Vain trifles and the triviality of the empty-headed, my old loves, held me back. They tugged at the garment of my flesh and whispered: 'Are you getting rid of us?' And 'from this moment we shall never be with you again, not for ever and ever'. What moment this and that are forbidden to you for ever and ever. What moment this and that I have called 'this and that'—what they were suggesting in what I have called 'this and that'—what they were suggesting, my God, may your mercy avert from the soul they were suggesting! What filth, what disgraceful things they were of your servant! What filth, what disgraceful things they were suggesting! I was listening to them with much less than half my attention. They were not frankly confronting me face to face on the road, but as it were whispering behind my back, as if they were furtively tugging at me as I was going away, trying to persuade me to look back. Nevertheless they held me back. I hesitated to detach myself, to be rid of them, to make the leap to where I was being called. Meanwhile the overwhelming force of habit was saying to me: 'Do you think you can live without them?'

(27) Nevertheless it was now putting the question very half-heartedly. For from that direction where I had set my face and towards which I was afraid to move, there appeared the dignified and chaste Lady Continence, serene and cheerful without coquetry, enticing me in an honourable manner to come and not to hesitate. To receive and embrace me she stretched out pious hands, filled with numerous good examples for me to follow. There were large numbers of boys and girls, a multitude of all ages, young adults and grave widows and elderly virgins. In every one of them was Continence herself, in no sense barren but 'the fruitful mother of children' (Ps. 112: 9), the joys born of you, Lord, her husband. And she smiled on me with a smile of encouragement as if to say: 'Are you incapable of doing what these men and women have done? Do you think them capable of achieving this by their own resources and not by the Lord their God? Their Lord God gave me to them. Why are you relying on yourself, only to find yourself unreliable? Cast yourself upon him, do not be afraid. He will not withdraw himself so that you fall. Make the leap without anxiety; he will catch you and heal you.'

I blushed with embarrassment because I was still listening to the mutterings of those vanities, and racked by hesitations I remained undecided. But once more it was as if she said: "Stop your ears to your impure members on earth and mortify them" (Col. 3: 5). They declare delights to you, but "not in accord with the law of the Lord your God" (Ps. 118: 85). This debate in my heart was a struggle of myself against myself. Alypius stood quite still at my side, and waited in silence for the outcome of my unprecedented state of agitation.

xii (28) From a hidden depth a profound self-examination had dredged up a heap of all my misery and set it 'in the sight of my heart' (Ps. 18: 15). That precipitated a vast storm bearing a massive downpour of tears. To pour it all out with the accompanying groans, I got up from beside Alypius (solitude seemed to me more appropriate for the business of weeping), and I moved further away to ensure that even his presence put no inhibition upon me. He sensed that this was my condition at that moment. I think I may have said something which made it clear that the sound of my voice was already choking with tears. So I stood up while in profound astonishment he remained where we were sitting. I threw myself down somehow under a certain figure,¹⁹ and let my tears flow freely. Rivers streamed from my eyes, a sacrifice acceptable to you (Ps. 50: 19), and (though not in these words, yet in this sense) I repeatedly said to you: 'How long, O Lord? How long, Lord, will you be angry to the uttermost? Do not be mindful of our old iniquities.' (Ps. 6: 4). For I felt my past to have a grip on me. It uttered wretched cries: 'How long, how long is it to be?' 'Tomorrow, tomorrow.'²⁰ 'Why not now? Why not an end to my impure life in this very hour?'

(29) As I was saying this and weeping in the bitter agony of my heart, suddenly I heard a voice from the nearby house²¹ chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl (I do not know which), saying and repeating over and over again 'Pick up and read, pick up and read.' At once my countenance changed, and I began to think intently whether there might be some sort of children's game in which such

¹⁹ Perhaps a symbolic reference to the figure of Adam (Gen. 3: 7; cf. John 1: 48).
²⁰ Persius, *Satires* 5: 66.

²¹ The oldest manuscript reads here 'from the house of God'. The child's voice is in any event a divine oracle to Augustine. The variant may echo Ps. 41: 5.

a chant is used. But I could not remember having heard of one. I checked the flood of tears and stood up. I interpreted it solely as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I might find. For I had heard how Antony happened to be present at the gospel reading, and took it as an admonition addressed to himself when the words were read: 'Go, sell all you have, give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me' (Matt. 19: 21).²² By such an inspired utterance he was immediately 'converted to you' (Ps. 50: 15). So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting. There I had put down the book of the apostle when I got up. I seized it, opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eyes lit: 'Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts' (Rom. 13: 13–14).

I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled.

(30) Then I inserted my finger or some other mark in the book and closed it. With a face now at peace I told everything to Alypius. What had been going on in his mind, which I did not know, he disclosed in this way. He asked to see the text I had been reading. I showed him, and he noticed a passage following that which I had read. I did not know how the text went on; but the continuation was 'Receive the person who is weak in faith' (Rom. 14: 1). Alypius applied this to himself, and he made that known to me. He was given confidence by this admonition. Without any agony of hesitation he joined me in making a good resolution and affirmation of intention, entirely congruent with his moral principles in which he had long been greatly superior to me. From there we went in to my mother, and told her. She was filled with joy. We told her how it had happened. She exulted, feeling it to be a triumph, and blessed you who 'are powerful to do more than we ask or think' (Eph. 3: 20). She saw that you had granted her far more than she had long been praying for in her unhappy and tearful groans.

The effect of your converting me to yourself was that I did not

now seek a wife and had no ambition for success in this world. I stood firm upon that rule of faith on which many years before you had revealed me to her.²³ You 'changed her grief into joy' (Ps. 29: 12) far more abundantly than she desired, far dearer and more chaste than she expected when she looked for grandchildren begotten of my body.

²³ See above, III. xi (19–20).