

RECENSÕES

Agostino. Vedere Dio (Lettera 147). Traduzione, introduzione e note a cura di Giovanni Catapano. Città Nuova, Roma, 2019. ISBN 978-88311-8261-4, 107 p.

The present work is the Italian translation, with introduction and notes, of a famous letter of Augustine written between the years 412/413 to Pauline. Many aspects of this publication are worthy of attention among which and to begin with I highlight three main features. Firstly, it is noteworthy that this is a superbly well-thought-out edition, whether from the philological perspective, or from the apparatus of primary sources and references to scholarly literature, which are often quoted in footnotes to clarify or complement information. Secondly, Catapano's solid experience in reading and commenting on the work of Augustine makes this translation a beautiful literary work. This translation has characteristics which make it a unique work and are not easily found in combination. On the one hand, it faithfully follows the Latin text. In so doing, it makes it an extremely clear edition allowing the reader to easily access the complex theories about the difficult problem of the vision of God. On the other hand, the translation preserves the literary beauty which characterizes Augustine's prose, as the great orator he also was. Finally, it is important to recall two aspects of this letter's historical and philosophical relevance. From an historical stance, concerning the preservation of the patristic heritage, this is one of the texts in which Augustine acts as a vehicle of transmission for the works and authority of Ambrose of Milan in the philosophy and theology of his time. Furthermore, it testifies to the impact that Ambrose's preaching exerted on Augustine. In this letter, the bishop of Hippo retells how the preaching of Ambrose was decisive for his conversion and baptism, both of which took place in 385-386. Now, this letter to Pauline was written twenty-seven years after those events. However, the fundamental aspects on which Augustine bases his approach to whether or not it is possible to see God with bodily eyes are taken from the preaching of Ambrose. As mentioned, the letter is one of the vehicle that textually preserves the preaching of

Ambrose, of which Augustine abundantly quotes relatively extensive passages. Catapano annotates each of these quotations and complements them with a weal of bibliographical references. As Catapano rightly notes the content of this letter sheds light on an aspect of Augustine's theory of the vision of God, which in my view has been quite illuminating. In this letter, it is quite easy to follow Augustine's itinerary concerning what we could call the "God's vision dossier". On the one hand, Augustine confirms his doctrine on the spiritual vision of God in the afterlife; on the other hand, the letter shows the point Augustine is in the development of his theory on the vision of God. Actually, he says in the end of this letter that he is potentially available to change his view. However, he clearly states what requisites would have to be fulfilled for that to happen. In pp. 6 to 8 and in the notes 2 to 17 of the introduction he wrote for this edition, Catapano gives an overview on Augustine's positions and the main stages of his thought on the doctrine of the vision of God, up to the years four hundred and twelve - four hundred and thirteen (412/413), when he writes this letter. These stages are summarized by Catapano in the following way: 1) through the preaching of the Manicheism and the interpretations this sect made of the Old Testament, Augustine adhered, in his youth, to an anthropomorphic conception of God; 2) through Ambrose's preaching, Augustine learned how to interpret the Bible through spiritual meaning; he also discovered the contradictions in the Manicheism anthropomorphic idea of God and he definitively rejected it. 3) In Letter 92, addressed to a widow of name Italica (in the year 408), I quote, from Catapano's introduction, pp. 6-7: "il vescovo di Ippona aveva negato senza mezzi termini che la luce divina possa essere vista con gli occhi del corpo, poiché ... tutto ciò che si può vedere con gli occhi del corpo è corpo, e per questo Dio non è visibile a questi occhi, non solo adesso ma nemmeno alla fine dei tempi, nel giorno del giudizio." Pauline would have been aware of the content of Letter 92 and questioned Augustine on the vision of God. Which was then Augustine's answer to Pauline? Augustine's position did not change substantially, neither since the years of his conversion, nor after the letter to Italica. The vision of God can never

be realized through bodily eyes. It will always be a mental vision. But what is the origin of this debate? The debate originates in the Holy Scripture, where one reads, for instance, in Mt. 5, 8: Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. However, the same Scripture declares that “no one has ever seen God”. And it is also the same Scripture that reports numerous experiences of the vision of God, such as that of Moses on Mount Sinai, or those of Paul, in his ecstasy. To solve these impasses, Augustine mentions the two ways he defended as those leading to knowledge: Authority and reason; and he extensively develops the analysis on the nature of each one. Catapano makes an excellent synthesis of this Augustine’s analysis in the Introduction of this book (pp. 10-11). The conclusion of Augustine’s explanation is as such: As the knowledge of the possibility to see God, either in the present or in the future, is based on testimony, it is knowledge of the kind of realities that cannot be based on the experience of corporeal realities. This is both because the experience one is seeking to understand is based on the authority of testimony, which is not visible with the eyes of the body; and because the object of knowledge here at stake is the incorporeal nature by excellence. Consequently, for Augustine the vision of God can only be an experience undergone with the mind, whether in time through a reflection based on biblical authority; or in eternity, through the mental experience of God’s ineffable nature. In 147, 16, 38, Augustine offers a summary of his doctrine on the nature of human knowledge and concludes that there is true knowledge of realities contemplated only with the mind, as is the case of knowledge of faith itself and of the contemplation of God: “le cose che sono contemplate con la mente [either the faith in the possibility to see God in the afterlife or the very cognitive experience of the vision of God] non abisognano di alcun senso del corpo affinché noi conosciamo che esse sono vere;” In so being, knowledge by testimony is possible. As Augustine mentions in 147, 5, 12: “Sapiamo che Dio può essere visto» per quanto non lo abbiamo veduto, ma abbiamo creduto all’ autorità divina, che è contenuta nei Libri santi”. Now, all rational interpretation of the vision of God must be coherent both with the experience of knowledge – corporeal

eyes cannot see incorporeal realities – and with biblical testimony, whence the proposal originates. Blissfulness includes the vision of God, promised to those who are pure of heart. In this letter to Pauline, Augustine remains faithful to the interpretation of the Scripture he had learned from Ambrose. As I mentioned, he abundantly quotes the *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam*, in which he interprets in a spiritual sense biblical passages reporting the ecstasy of Moses, the ecstasy of Paul and the latter's descriptions of the knowledge of God (147, 12, 29-15, 36). Also in this letter, Augustine's answer on the nature of the vision of God is quite prudent: he remains faithful to the Scripture and to the interpretation of it by great authorities like Ambrose and Jerome. Based on the aforementioned two sources of knowledge – reason and authority – Augustine concludes that there cannot be any intervention of the body in the vision of God. It is only a mental vision, which depends, as the Scripture says, on a moral quality – the pure of heart will see God. He thus enjoins Pauline to preserve the purity of heart and prepare her interior dwelling for the vision of God, in which she believes and which she aspires to. However, in the end of the letter, Augustine considers the possibility of changing his own unshakable certainties. For that, he requires two conditions, one of them, again, grounded on reason, the other on authority. He declares his willingness to learn from whoever can teach him the qualities of the spiritual body of the resurrected, as it is said in 147 21.149: “Circa la qualità del corpo spirituale, che viene promesso a coloro che risorgeranno, non rifiuto certo o di imparare o di cercare ancora qualcosa». But these qualities must preserve this undoubtful principle: «che la natura di Dio non sia mai vista in un luogo, non lo ricerco perche non ne dubito.” In note 111, p. 83, Catapano recalls that the principle of God's incorporeality has become, for Augustine since the times of his conversion, «nella stella polare della sua navigazione verso il porto della filosofia». Augustine is decidedly engaged with these principles and will not renounce them in any explanation about the vision of God. Regarding biblical authority, Catapano also transcribes (in note 109 p. 82) a relevant passage from Sermon 277, 14, 14, in which Augustine explains that he did not find

yet a single passage in the Holy Scripture attesting that the vision of God in beatitude could include bodily experiences. On the participation of the body in the vision of God, Augustine says the following: «nella Scrittura non troviamo alcuna determinazione al riguardo o non ancora l'abbiamo trovata. (...) O non esiste, o è occulto, oppure mi si nasconde.». In fact, in this letter, Augustine reasserts that the vision of God in beatitude will only occur as a mental vision, without the interference of the body. This vision is anticipated through faith on the testimony from the Scripture, which is a purely mental experience; and the object of this vision in beatitude is the incorporeal and ineffable nature of God. Augustine is convinced that the human nature in the state of beatitude is akin to the angelical one. He repeatedly quotes the sentence from the Scripture in which one reads that in resurrection men will be like the angels. (147, 9, 22; 15, 37). However, here Augustine does not seem wholly secure in his opinion, or at least he seems open to the possibility of changing his position. But he adds that to accept that the vision of God could include any kind of corporeality, two conditions would have to be met: that such corporeality would not be carnal; and that it could be possible to find in the Holy Scripture some evidence of the presence of the body in the afterlife. Regarding the first condition, one would have to show that the body in the state of beatitude is no longer a material body. Here Augustine acknowledges that this position has its defenders, and he thinks that it might be true: “altri che non dubitano affatto che Dio stesse non sai corpo, però ritengono che coloro che risorgeranno a vita eterna vedranno Dio anche per mezzo del corpo, per il motivo che sperano che la qualità del corpo spirituale sia tale che anche quella che era stata carne diventi spirit”. Concerning the requisite of the biblical support for the subsistence of corporeality in the afterlife - by the time Augustine writes this letter he says he had not yet found such support. According to my interpretation, he will find it years later, when writing Book XII of his *De Genesi ad Litteram*. In this work, he foregoes the spiritual interpretation of the Scripture and of Saint Paul's ecstasy, that he still defended in Letter 147. And he asks himself why Saint Paul said he did not know whether in his ecstasy

he had seen God with his body or outside it. Why, if he was faced with the divine truth itself, having had a purely mental experience of God, did Paul not acquire true knowledge of himself? Augustine finds a huge contradiction in this doubt of Paul. Such ignorance is neither compatible with the experience of the plenitude of truth, which is God, nor with the nature of the mental vision, which is always truth. Thus, in this passage of the *De Genesi ad litteram* Augustine seems to have found his missing piece: a biblical passage from which infer that the experience of corporality is relevant to the vision of god. In the letter to Pauline, Augustine states that, in order to admit the possibility for the presence of the body in beatitude, he needs an interpretation of the Scripture that would not compete with the light of his “polar star”: “che la natura di Dio non sia mai vista in un luogo. And that interpretation, going through *De Genesi ad litteram* XII, will be completed in *City of God* XXII, as Catapano aptly mentions. This Italian translation of Letter 147, by Giovanni Catapano, accompanied by an introduction and notes, is another one among the multiple excellent contribution by this scholar, a specialist in Augustine, to make known the importance of Augustine's works and doctrines to the Western philosophical tradition.

Paula Oliveira e Silva