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Seeing and Believing in Augustine's *De videndo Deo*

Abstract

The aim of my paper is to clarify the content and function of the distinction between seeing and believing stated by Augustine in his *De videndo deo*. I try to achieve this in three steps. First, I briefly describe the genesis, the fundamental ideas and the structure of *De videndo deo*. Second, I analyse in detail the distinction between seeing and believing put forward in the first part of Augustine's text. Finally, I show the role that this distinction plays in the overall argument of *De videndo deo*.

Keywords: faith, God, theophanies, value of theological opinions, vision.

Ancient and medieval studied Authors: Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo.

Distinção entre Ver e Acreditar no *De videndo deo* de Santo Agostinho

Resumo

Este artigo tem o propósito de elucidar o conteúdo e a função da distinção entre ver e crer, enunciada por Agostinho no seu *De videndo deo*. Procuo alcançar este objetivo em três passos: em primeiro lugar, descrevo brevemente a gênese, as ideias fundamentais e a estrutura do *De videndo deo*; em segundo lugar, analiso em pormenor a distinção entre ver e crer, avançada na primeira parte do texto de Agostinho; por último, mostro o papel que esta distinção desempenha na argumentação geral do *De videndo deo*.

Palavras-chave: fé, Deus, teofanias, valor das opiniões teológicas, visão.

Autores antigos e medievais estudados: Agostinho, Ambrósio de Milão.

O essencial é saber ver

(Alberto Caeiro [Fernando Pessoa], *O guardador de rebanhos*, XXIV)

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1. Genesis, fundamental ideas and structure of *De videndo deo*

As we know, *De videndo deo* is a long letter (number 147) that Augustine wrote to keep the promise, made long before to a certain Paulina, to give an answer in a «fulsome and lengthy» way (*prolixè [...] copioseque*)¹ to the question of whether God can be seen through the eyes of the body. In writing to Paulina, Augustine actually addresses every future reader (*lecturus*)² who asks the same question, and in a special way those who are inclined to give a positive answer to it. The letter is dated to AD 412/413³.

Previously, Augustine had addressed the issue in a short letter (number 92), which was sent to a widow named Italica, dating from AD 408⁴. In the letter, the bishop of Hippo denied in no uncertain terms that the divine light can be seen with the eyes of the body, because everything that can be seen with these eyes is in a certain location, occupying a greater portion of space with a greater part of itself and a smaller portion with a smaller part. In other words, all that can be seen with the eyes of the body is a body, and for this reason God is not visible to these eyes, not only at the present moment, but also at the end of time, on the Day of Judgment⁵. God *can* be seen in his incorporeal nature, as shown in biblical verses such as *1 Jn* 3:2 and *1 Cor.* 13:12, but with the mind, not with the body, once we come to our heavenly homeland. Augustine had therefore hurled himself against the «unrestrained loquacity» (*inpunita loquacitas*), the «senselessness» (*insipientia*) and the «madness» (*dementia*) of unspecified adversaries, who claimed instead that we see God with the mind now, while after the resurrection we see him with

¹ Augustinus Hipponensis, *De videndo deo = Epistula* 147, ed. A. Goldbacher, (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, vol. XLIV) Tempsky – Freytag, Wien – Leipzig 1904, 1, p. 275. I quote from the translation by R. Teske, *Letter 147, A Book on Seeing God*, in *The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. II/1, *Letters 100-155*, translation and notes by R. Teske, New City Press, Hyde Park (NY) 2003, pp. 317-349.

² Augustinus, *De videndo deo*, ed. A. Goldbacher, cit., 1, 6, p. 280.

³ «Summer 412 – early 413», according to J. Anoz, «Cronología de la producción agustiniana», *Augustinus* 47 (2002) p. 250, who relies on P.-M. Hombert, *Nouvelles recherches de chronologie agustinienne*, Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, Paris 2000, pp. 183-184.

⁴ Cfr. J. Anoz, «Cronología...», cit., p. 249.

⁵ Cfr. Augustinus, *Epistula* 92, 3, ed. K.D. Daur (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, vol. XXX-1/A), Brepols, Turnhout 2005, p. 161. For the theory of corporal vision underlying this conviction, cfr. footnote 83, in Agostino, *Vedere Dio (Lettera 147)*, traduzione, introduzione e note a cura di G. Catapano, (Collana di Testi Patristici, 261), Città Nuova, Roma 2019, p. 72 (this paper takes up and develops what I wrote in that book).

the body; indeed, everyone will see him like this, even the impious⁶. Augustine had finally urged Italica to read his letter to those adversaries and to let him know their reply; an exhortation repeated to Cyprian, a priest who was the bearer of the letter⁷.

We do not know if the letter to Italica reached the hands or ears of the adversaries that Augustine had in mind; however, a bishop⁸ felt personally struck by the harsh criticism contained in it, and Augustine had to pray to another brother in the episcopate, Fortunatianus of Sicca Veneria, to give his apologies and his true intention, directed against the conception of God being in human form⁹. We can understand the vehemence with which Augustine opposed the conception of God as endowed with members similar to human ones: as a young man, influenced by Manichean criticism¹⁰, he mistakenly believed that this was precisely the idea of God transmitted by the Old Testament; it was Ambrose's homilies, heard in Milan, that revealed to him the spiritual meaning of biblical expressions and made him understand the true meaning of the doctrine of man as the image of God (*imago dei*)¹¹. Since then, the principle of not thinking of anything corporeal

⁶ Cfr. Augustinus, *Epistula* 92, 4-6, ed. K.D. Daur, cit., pp. 162-164.

⁷ Cfr. Augustinus, *Epistula* 92/A, ed. K.D. Daur, cit., p. 166.

⁸ E. Naab, in Augustinus, *Über Schau und Gegenwart des unsichtbaren Gottes*, Texte mit Einführung und Übersetzung von E. Naab, Frommann – Holzboog, Stuttgart – Bad Cannstatt 1998, pp. 17-25, hypothesises that the bishop was Silvanus of Summa, primate in Numidia from AD 411 to AD 419.

⁹ The letter to Fortunatianus is number 148 in the epistolary and is called «a warning» (*communitorium*) in Augustinus, *Retractationes*, ed. A. Mutzenbecher, (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, vol. LVII) Brepols, Turnhout 1984, II, 41, p. 123. It may be dated to AD 411/412: cfr. Hombert, *Nouvelles recherches*, cit., p. 57, footnote 132; J. Anoz, «Cronología...», cit., p. 251. Augustine catalogues anthropomorphism among heresies in *De haeresibus* 50 (ed. R. Vander Plaetse – C. Beukers, (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, vol. XLVI) Brepols, Turnhout 1969, pp. 321-322), identifying the Anthropomorphites with the Audians, that is, with the followers of Audius (d. 372). In *Epistula* 148, 4, 14 (ed. A. Goldbacher, cit., pp. 343-344) he quotes a passage of Jerome against the Anthropomorphites.

¹⁰ Cfr. Augustinus, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, ed. D. Weber, (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, vol. XCI), Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien 1998, I, 17, 27, p. 94.

¹¹ Cfr. Augustinus, *Confessiones*, ed. M. Simonetti, (Scrittori Greci e Latini) Fondazione Lorenzo Valla – Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milano 1993, V, 10, 19, p. 78; VI, 3, 4 – 4, 5, pp. 98-100. As M.-A. Vannier writes in «La Lettre 147 et la question de la mystique augustinienne», in F. Young – M. Edwards – P. Parvis (eds.), *Studia Patristica*, vol. XLIII, Peeters, Leuven – Paris – Dudley, MA 2006, p. 280, the reference to Ambrose made in *De videndo deo* can be seen first of all as «un écho et un approfondissement du passage qu'il [*i.e.* Augustine] a effectué du manichéisme au

when one thinks of God and the soul had remained the «polar star» of Augustine's philosophical and theological reflection¹².

The question of the vision of God by the risen saints was, however, more complex than Augustine had initially imagined. Bishops who were not exactly crude anthropomorphites (such as the one involuntarily offended by the letter to Italica) and other believers far from heresy seriously questioned the function of the risen body in the future contemplation of God and demanded less peremptory and hasty explanations. Among these believers was Paulina, the «pious handmaid of God», to whom *De videndo deo* is addressed¹³. Paulina too had read the letter to Italica and thought that it «should be explained with greater detail and fullness»¹⁴. Unlike the letter to Italica, in the letter to Paulina Augustine no longer categorically excludes that the eyes of the risen body can see God – provided, however, that we do not assume the corporeity of God himself or the complete spiritualisation of the glorious body, equivalent in fact to a denial of the resurrection of the flesh. Although he is willing to accept a positive response free of these errors, if demonstrated by convincing arguments¹⁵, for the time being he has a still different, negative opinion, supported by Ambrose's authority¹⁶.

Therefore, if in *De videndo deo* Augustine simply keeps open the possibility of a positive solution to the problem, criticising however all those to his knowledge, in *De civitate dei* he comes to find out a plausible one and share it. In book XXII of the work, probably composed in AD 425¹⁷, Augustine in fact judges it

christianisme et plus précisément de l'influence de la prédication d'Ambroise de Milan, qui lui a fait découvrir la nature spirituelle de Dieu et de l'image de Dieu en l'homme».

¹² Cfr. Augustinus, *De beata vita*, ed. J. Doignon, (Bibliothèque Augustinienne, vol. 4/1), Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1986, 1, 4, p. 56.

¹³ Augustinus, *De videndo deo*, ed. A. Goldbacher, cit., 1, p. 274. We have no certain information about Paulina except the few that can be inferred from Augustine's letter itself. It is possible, but not demonstrable, that she is the same Paulina who, with her husband Armentarius, is the addressee of another Augustinian letter, number 127, from which it appears that the two made a vow of continence (cfr. Saint Augustin, *La vision de Dieu*, Présentation, Traduction et note complémentaire par J. Lagouanère, Préface de P. Cambronne, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 2010, pp. 18-19). From § 2 of *De videndo deo* it appears, however, that Paulina was «weighed down with years», which is not in keeping with the dating of letter 127 to only three years before (cfr. J. Anoz, «Cronología...», cit., p. 250).

¹⁴ Augustinus, *De videndo deo*, ed. A. Goldbacher, cit., 6, 17, p. 288.

¹⁵ Cfr. *ibid.*, 21, 49, p. 324.

¹⁶ Cfr. *ibid.*, 20, 48, p. 323.

¹⁷ Cfr. J. Anoz, «Cronología...», cit., p. 237.

possible and «highly credible» that, through both our spiritual bodies of resurrection and the bodies of the new heaven and the new earth that we will contemplate, we will see with «very clear transparency» God, everywhere present, in the same way in which we now see the life of the human beings around us, which is invisible in itself, observing their bodies with our eyes. This will happen either because the eyes of the spiritual body will be endowed with a power similar to that of the mind (a hypothesis which, however, cannot be demonstrated on the basis of the sacred Scriptures), or because God will be so well known to us that we will be able to see him, not only in himself but also «by means of the bodies in every body» on which our gaze is directed¹⁸.

De videndo deo should therefore be read as the intermediate moment in the evolution of Augustine's thought regarding the problem of the visibility of God through the spiritual body: it testifies to a position no longer totally negative, as in the letter to Italica, and not yet openly positive, as in *De civitate dei*. From this point of view, *De videndo deo* provides significant confirmation of Augustine's description of himself as «one of those who write while making progress and make progress while writing»¹⁹.

Moving on to the structure of *De videndo deo*, we can see that the text clearly has three main parts²⁰. The first, which occupies §§ 1–11²¹, is defined by the author himself as an «introduction» (*praelocutio*)²², which has the function of providing a double «preparatory instruction» (*praestructio*)²³. I dwell on this preamble in the second step of my paper.

The second main part of *De videndo deo* goes from §§ 12–37 and starts from an exegetical problem. The problem concerns the compatibility of the theophanies, which the Scriptures attest in numerous cases («Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job,

18 Cfr. Augustinus, *De civitate dei*, ed. B. Dombart – A. Kalb, (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, vol. XLVIII) Brepols, Turnhout 1955, XXII, 29, pp. 856-862.

19 Augustinus, *Epistula* 143, 2, ed. A. Goldbacher, cit., p. 251 (my translation).

20 For a more articulated division of the text, cfr. J. Lagouanère in Saint Augustin, *La vision de Dieu*, cit., pp. 31-32, who takes up the proposal of M. Albaric, *Les sources bibliques du De videndo deo de saint Augustin*, Le Saulchoir, Paris 1970.

21 As we know, starting with the Maurine edition (1679-1700), Augustine's writings are divided into sections numbered with Arabic numerals. This subdivision is accompanied by the chapter subdivision introduced at the beginning of the sixteenth century by Johannes Amerbach in the first printed edition of the *Opera omnia*.

22 Cfr. Augustinus, *De videndo deo*, ed. A. Goldbacher, cit., 5, p. 279; 1, 6, p. 280; 4, 11, p. 284.

23 *Ibid.*, 1, 6, p. 280.

Moses, Micaiah, Isaiah, and any others»²⁴, with the clear denial stated by the apostle John, according to whom no one has ever seen God (*Jn* 1:18; *I Jn* 4:12). To resolve this difficulty, Augustine proposes to Paulina to pay attention to what he, from the time of the letter to Italica, has meanwhile (*interim*)²⁵ learned «from other distinguished exegetes of the divine Scriptures»²⁶ and, more precisely, by «blessed Ambrose, the bishop of Milan»²⁷, of whom Augustine literally reports a long passage from the commentary on the Gospel of Luke²⁸. Ambrose's position can be summarised as follows:

- 1) In the theophanies, the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit has made himself visible to the bodily eyes of people chosen by him «in that form which was chosen by their [*i.e.*, the Trinity's] will and not that which was fashioned from their nature»²⁹, that is, with a physical appearance that does not belong to God's nature, which instead has remained hidden both from the eyes and from the mind of anyone.
- 2) Even in the resurrection, God will not be seen by everybody, but only by the pure of heart.
- 3) «God is not seen in a location but by a clean heart. He is not sought by bodily eyes»³⁰.

²⁴ Ibid., 5, 14, p. 287.

²⁵ J. Lagouanère in Saint Augustin, *La vision de Dieu*, cit., p. 27, considers plausible the hypothesis, already advanced by A.-M. La Bonnardière, according to which Augustine could have read «directement» Ambrose's *Expositio* only after the arrival in Africa of Paulinus of Milan, who accused Celestius in Carthage in AD 411. In fact, the other quotations from Ambrose's work are to be found not only in the *commonitorium* to Fortunatianus (*Epistula* 148: vide footnote 9 above), but also in Augustinian writings linked to the anti-Pelagian controversy, therefore subsequent to AD 411 (*De natura et gratia*: AD 414-415; *De gratia Christi et de peccato originali*: AD 418; *Contra duas epistulas Pelagianorum*: AD 420-421; *Contra Iulianum*: AD 420-421; *Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum*: AD 428-430; *De dono perseverantiae*: AD 429).

²⁶ Augustinus, *De videndo deo*, ed. A. Goldbacher, cit., 6, 17, p. 288.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 289.

²⁸ Ibid., 6, 18, pp. 289-292 = Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam*, ed. G. Coppa, (Sancti Ambrosii episcopi Mediolanensis opera, vol. XI) Bibliotheca Ambrosiana – Città Nuova Editrice, Milano – Roma 1978, I, 24-27, pp. 120-124.

²⁹ Ambrosius, *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam*, ed. G. Coppa, cit., I, 25, p. 122; quoted in Augustinus, *De videndo deo*, ed. A. Goldbacher, cit., 6, 18, p. 290; 7, 19, p. 293.

³⁰ Ambrosius, *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam*, ed. G. Coppa, cit., I, 27, p. 124; quoted, almost in a refrain, in Augustinus, *De videndo deo*, ed. A. Goldbacher, cit., 6, 18, p. 291; 11, 26, p. 300; 11, 28, p. 303; 12, 29, p. 303; 15, 37, p. 311; 16, 39, p. 314; 17, 44, p. 318; 19, 46, p. 320; 19, 47, p. 322; 23, 52, p. 329.

The third and last main part of *De videndo deo* goes from § 39 to the conclusion (§ 54). Recalling the distinction between seeing and believing set out in the preamble, Augustine invites Paulina to consider both what she saw and what she believed by reading the letter up to that point. It is in this final part of the text that the function of the distinction between seeing and believing placed at the beginning clearly emerges; I therefore consider this in the third step of this paper.

2. The distinction between seeing and believing

Let us now take a closer look at the preamble to *De videndo deo*. As Augustine explains to Paulina, this introduction first of all has the declared purpose, of preparing:

you and others who will read these ideas as to what sort of judge you ought to be of my writings or of those of any others. In that way you will not either suppose that you know (*scire*) something that you do not know or rashly believe something that you have not perceived either by the senses of the body or by the gaze (*contuitu*) of the mind in a direct vision (*evidentia*) of the very thing to be known or something that you have not learned must be believed by the authority of the canonical scriptures, even if it was not present to the senses of either the mind or the body³¹.

This first purpose, pursued in §§ 1-5, consists in knowing how to distinguish between what Augustine will show and what he will propose to believe. Showing (*ostendere*) means remembering (*admonire*) something that you can see (*videre*), either with the eyes of the flesh or with the gaze of the mind; that is, something that you can have experience and direct knowledge of. What is not seen by the eyes or the mind, however, can only be believed (*credere*) on the basis of the authority of the canonical Scriptures (in which case one must believe it without hesitation) or of other witnesses or testimonies (in which case one may believe it or not, depending on their weight):

Therefore, hold on to this distinction. Accordingly, if in the course of the discussion I call your attention to something that you see with the eyes of the flesh or that you perceive or recall that you have perceived with any other sense, as we perceive colors, sounds, smells, tastes, and warmth or anything else we perceive through the body by seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching, or if I call your attention to something that you see with the gaze (*intuitu*) of the mind, as you see your life, willing, thought, memory, understanding, knowledge, faith, and anything else you see by the mind and do not doubt that it is true, not merely by believing, but

³¹ Augustinus, *De videndo deo*, ed. A. Goldbacher, cit., 5, p. 279.

by clearly seeing, you should judge that I have clearly shown this. But if I do not show you something so that you hold it as seen and perceived by a sense of the body or of the mind, and if I nonetheless say something that must be either true or false but does not seem to fall into either of those two kinds, it remains for you only to believe or not to believe it. But if it is supported by the clear authority of those divine scriptures, namely, those that are called «canonical» in the Church, it must be believed without any doubt. But you may believe or not believe other witnesses or testimonies by which you might be persuaded to believe something to the extent that you consider that they have or do not have sufficient weight to produce faith³².

For example, Paulina *sees* the sun with the eyes of her body and, thanks to its light, she can read Augustine's letter, and she *sees* with the gaze of her mind her own will to know the answer to the question she posed; but she *believes* that God can be seen on the basis of the evangelical Beatitude that promises the vision of God to the pure of hearts. If what Augustine will say to Paulina will be such that it can be seen by Paulina or believed by her by the authority of the Scriptures, then she will have the evidence or the certain faith of it; all the rest she can believe or not by pondering the degree of authority of Augustine's statements. Paulina (and, with her, every other reader) is invited to evaluate Augustine's words «in accord with the interior self»; that is according to «the spirit of» her «mind»³³. As Augustine urges in § 2:

I do not want you to follow my authority so that you think that it is necessary for you to believe something because I said it. Rather, either believe the canonical scriptures if there is something that you do not as yet see is true, or believe the truth who teaches interiorly in order that you may see this clearly³⁴.

In this admonishment we can see, for now, a twofold usefulness of believing: it serves to keep something true of which there is not yet direct evidence, but also to keep to a truth already sensed, but only in part, in order to arrive at full evidence of it.

Secondly, in §§ 6–11 the preamble to *De videndo deo* aims to clarify well the difference between believing and seeing with the mind. This is the section of the letter that interests us most here. Augustine begins by stating that, according to «some», only the act of believing a true thing is an act of observing with the mind:

For some (*nonnulli*) think that what we call «believing», when something true is believed, is merely to see it with the mind (*mente contueri*). But if that is so, our introduction is mistaken

³² Ibid., 4, p. 278.

³³ bid., 2, p. 276.

³⁴ Ibidem.

in which we made the following distinctions. That is, it is one thing to sense something through the body, like the sun in the sky or a mountain, a tree, or any body on the earth, and it is something else to sense a thing no less evident by the look (*intuitu*) of the mind, as we see our will interiorly when we will something or our thought when we think or our memory when we recall something or anything of the sort that we see in the mind without the body. But it is still something else to believe something that is neither present nor recalled to have been present to the sight of the body or the mind, such as that Adam was created without parents and that Christ was born of a virgin, suffered, and rose³⁵.

As it is in his style (which makes scholars despair by pushing them to demanding investigations of *Quellenforschung*, which are rarely successful), Augustine does not specify who the «some» are who make mental observation coincide with faith in a true thing. Whatever their identity, their opinion contradicts what is stated in the previous section of the preamble; namely, the distinction between these three acts: (1) to perceive something through the body (e.g. the sun in the sky); (2) to perceive something through the gaze of the mind (e.g. the volitions within us); and (3) to believe that which is not present, or recalled to have been present, to our body or to our mind (e.g. the creation of Adam and the birth of Christ from a virgin). To confirm and consolidate this distinction, Augustine must now clarify more clearly the difference between believing and looking with the mind at something present:

What then shall we say? Is it enough that we say that there is this difference between seeing and believing, namely, that present things (*praesentia*) are seen while absent ones are believed? This is perhaps quite enough if we understand that those things are in this passage said to be present that are available (*praesto*) to the senses of the mind or the body for they are called “present” because the word is derived from this. For in that way I see this sunlight by the sense of the body, and in that way I clearly see my will as well, because it is available to the sense of my mind and is present to me interiorly. But if someone whose lips and voice are present to me reveals his will to me, because the will that he reveals to me is, nonetheless, hidden from the sense of my body and of my mind, I believe; I do not see. Or, if I think he is lying, I do not believe, even if things are perhaps as he says. We believe those things, then, that are not present to our senses if the testimony that is offered to them seems suitable, but we see those things which are available (*praesto*), and for this reason they are called present to the senses of either the mind or the body. [...] Nor should you understand that, because I said that things not present to our senses are believed, those things that we once saw and retain and are certain that we did see are to be counted among those things that are believed, though they are not at that moment present to us when they are recalled by us. For they are not counted among things believed but among things seen, and they are for this reason known, not because we had faith in others as witnesses but because without any doubt we recall and know that we have seen them³⁶.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 6, p. 280.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2, 7, p. 280.

Present things are *seen*, absent things are *believed*. The word «present» (*praesentia*) means things that, etymologically, «are available» (*praesto sunt*) to the senses of the mind or of the body. The difference between things seen and things believed is therefore not a difference of nature but, rather, a difference of position towards the seer and the believer. In other words, the same thing can be both visible and believable: it is visible in its presence and believable in its absence. Augustine makes two clarifications in this regard. The first is that «visible» is to be understood as «perceptible», not only by sight but also by the other senses, although the senses of the body are not relevant with regard to the distinction between mental sight and faith. The second point is that the things that are believed are absent not only with respect to our senses, but also with respect to our memory. If something is now absent, but we remember having perceived it in the past, then it is classified among the things seen and not among the things believed. In fact, believing something is different from remembering it: if I remember that something was there, I do not need to believe it; if I do not remember it, either because I have never perceived it or because I have forgotten it, only then can I believe it.

The fact that believing is different from seeing does not mean, however, that we cannot say that we know the things we believe. «Knowledge (*scientia*)», says Augustine in § 8, «is made up of both things seen and things believed»³⁷. In the case of things seen, we ourselves are the witnesses; in the case of things believed, others are the witnesses. When other witnesses are reliable and their testimonies are credible, we can be sure of what we believe, and it is on the basis of this certainty that it is said that we see with our minds the things we believe righteously. On the one hand, this way of speaking is not wrong, and Augustine himself admits (in another letter, number 120 to Consentius) that faith has «eyes of its own by which somehow sees that what it does not yet see is true and by which it most certainly sees that it does not yet see what it believes»³⁸. On the other hand, it is wrong to think that this vision of faith exhausts all forms of mental vision and, above all, that it coincides with the possession of the evidence of the things believed.

³⁷ Ibid., 3, 8, p. 281.

³⁸ Augustinus, *Epistula* 120, 2, 8, ed. K.D. Daur, (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, vol. XXX-I/B) Brepols, Turnhout 2009, p. 149 (transl. by R. Teske, in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, vol. II/1, cit., p. 134).

To further clarify the difference between seeing and believing, Augustine sets the example of a person to whom someone addresses the exhortation to believe that Christ has risen from the dead. What that person sees is different from what he or she believes – of course if they accept the invitation to believe. The believer perceives the evangelizer (the witness) and their exhortation (the testimony) corporally. The believer then mentally sees the meaning of the words from which the testimony is formed; the believer mentally sees their own faith, with which they believe; their own reflection, with which they reflect on the usefulness of their faith; their own will, with which they wanted to embrace the Christian religion; and the believer also mentally sees an image of the resurrection of Christ, that they imagine without having perceived it corporally. There are some things, however, that the believer does not see, but only believes, because they are not present to their soul or body: they are the will of the evangelizing witness and the very resurrection of Christ, which in reality no one saw at the moment it happened. With this example, Augustine thinks that he has sufficiently clarified, to Paulina and other readers, the difference between seeing with the mind or with the body (an act that always has present things as its object) and believing (an act that, instead, never has present things as its object) and that therefore is different from seeing mentally, even though it is carried out with the mind and can be seen with the mind:

But you have, I think, sufficiently recognized from this introduction of mine what it is to see either with the mind or with the body and how believing differs from them. What the mind does is, of course, seen by the mind since our faith is evident (*conspicua*) to our mind. But what we believe by that faith is, nonetheless, absent both from the gaze of our body, as the body in which Christ rose is absent, and from the gaze (*aspectu*) of the mind of someone else, as your faith is absent from the gaze of my mind. And yet I believe it is in you, though I do not see it with the body, something you cannot do either, or with the mind, something you can do, just as I can see my faith, which you cannot see³⁹.

3. The role of the distinction between seeing and believing in *De videndo deo*

Here we are at the last step of our itinerary. What role does this distinction between seeing and believing, which Augustine makes clear in the preamble, play in *De videndo deo*? We have already ascertained the explicit intentions of the first part of the letter: Augustine wants to prepare Paulina and other readers to be able

³⁹ Augustinus, *De videndo deo*, ed. A. Goldbacher, cit., 4, 11, p. 284.

to judge how his letter, and any other text of the same nature – that is, any theological writing other than the Sacred Scriptures –, should be judged. Paulina and other readers should be aware that the opinion of a theologian is not binding; it is placed on a lower level than evidence and the sacred text and should be assessed on the basis of both. The credibility of a theological opinion is directly proportional to its conformity to the truth that can be clearly perceived through the soul and the body or believed with the greatest certainty thanks to the supreme authority of the Scriptures. Furthermore, Augustine wishes to warn Paulina and other readers against presuming to know what they do not see clearly or do not believe with a biblically founded certainty.

The third part of *De videndo deo* is a practical application of the criteria set out at the beginning, and it concretely shows us their function within the text. As for the things she has seen when reading the second part of the letter, Paulina is urged by Augustine to pay attention to how she saw them:

whether it was by recalling that you saw them through the body, such as heavenly and earthly bodies, or whether you never attained them by bodily seeing but, in looking with the mind alone, you saw that they were true and certain, such as your will⁴⁰.

Paying attention, moreover, to how she can see this distinction between the two types of vision, the corporal and the mental, she will notice that it is with her mind that she sees it, not with her body.

Turning then to the things she has believed, Paulina will realise that she has believed more firmly in the statements of the Scriptures than in those of Ambrose and Augustine himself, as it should be. «Certainly», writes our author in § 39:

if you are truly wise in drawing distinctions, you see that we are far below that authority and that I am indeed farther below it⁴¹. But however much you believe both of us, you by no means set us on a par with that excellence⁴².

⁴⁰ Ibid., 16, 38, p. 312. On the evolution of Augustine's thought about the purification of the «inner man» necessary to see God, from the initial closeness to Neoplatonic positions to the recognition of the role of revelation, passing through the valorization of faith and charity, cfr. J. Ratzinger, «Der Weg der religiösen Erkenntnis nach dem heiligen Augustinus», in P. Granfield – J.A. Jungmann (eds.), *Kyriakon. Festschrift Johannes Quasten*, vol. II, Aschendorff, Münster 1970, pp. 553-564.

⁴¹ Augustine's esteem for Ambrose's *auctoritas* is sincere. Not even Ambrose's *auctoritas*, however, is comparable to that of the canonical Scriptures: cfr. Augustinus, *De gratia Christi et de peccato originali*, ed. C.F. Urba – J. Zycha, (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, vol. XLII), Tempsky – Freytag, Praha – Wien – Leipzig 1902, I, 43, 47, pp. 159-160.

⁴² Augustinus, *De videndo deo*, ed. A. Goldbacher, cit., 16, 39, pp. 313-314. Cfr. *Epistula* 93, 10,

The distinction between seeing and believing is therefore functional to a hierarchical disposition of credible authorities, according to which no theologian, even one as eminent as Ambrose, can be placed on the same level as the canonical Scriptures.

Moreover, in the absence of full evidence about the visual power of the risen body and in the absence of unequivocal statements from Scripture, Paulina and other readers have every right to have doubts about the truth of Ambrose's and Augustine's views. Paulina can legitimately think to herself: «What if God is seen by a clean heart and is, nonetheless, seen in a location? Or, What if those who are clean of heart will also see God with bodily eyes when this corruptible body has put on incorruption, when we will be equal to the angels?»⁴³.

The distinction between seeing and believing, however, to the extent that it includes the distinction between seeing with the body and seeing with the mind, can help Paulina to find an answer to her doubt, or at least to recognise the plausibility of Ambrose's and Augustine's opinion. Paulina sees her doubt clearly in her own mind with the eyes of her heart, eyes which she must not hesitate to put before the bodily ones, since she judges her outer eyes precisely with her inner ones. And this judgement takes place in a light that does not diffuse into space and that is not reachable by the body's sight. If Paulina struggles to capture that incorporeal light because of the images of the bodies she has introjected, owing to the «habit of living in the flesh»⁴⁴, she should at least consider these images themselves and observe that they are resemblances of bodies, not bodies. How much less, therefore, will inner realities that «bear no likeness to bodies»⁴⁵, such as charity, be bodies! And how much less will God be a body, of whom charity is a pledge in us! God, whose peace exceeds all intellect (*Phil* 4:7), is superior to our mind, which is the best part of us:

And for this reason, since there is something of us that is visible, such as this body, and something of us that is invisible, such as our interior self, and since our best part, that is, our mind and intelligence, is invisible to the eyes of the body, how can that which is better than our best part be visible to our lesser part? ⁴⁶

35, ed. K.D. Daur, cit., p. 193; *Epistula* 148, 4, 15, ed. A. Goldbacher, cit., pp. 344-345; *De natura et gratia*, ed. C.F. Urba – J. Zycha, (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, vol. LX) Tempsky – Freytag, Wien – Leipzig 1913, 61, 71, p. 286.

⁴³ Augustinus, *De videndo deo*, ed. A. Goldbacher, cit., 16, 40, p. 314.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 17, 42, p. 316.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 17, 43, p. 317.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 18, 45, p. 320.

If for no other reasons, through these reflections on the way in which she herself sees and believes, Paulina will therefore be able to find within herself a confirmation of the superiority of mental sight over bodily sight and of the incorporeal nature of God, invisible to the eyes of this body. «The whole question, then, about the spiritual body remains»⁴⁷, that is, whether it will have access to what is precluded to the eyes of the «animal» body. With regard to this question, which he addresses starting from the last lines of § 48 but postponing the in-depth discussion of it to «some other work»⁴⁸, Augustine merely places three firm points:

1) God is not a body.

2) The power of seeing does not belong only to bodies, as can be understood from the fact that, in the Trinity, the Father sees the Son and that, at the moment of creation, God saw all creatures, individually and as a whole.

3) The spiritual body will still be a body.

Putting these three points aside, the spiritual body may also be given the power to see God if there are valid arguments to support this view. Augustine, for his part, aligns himself with Ambrose's opinion, adding to reinforce that of another great exegete, Jerome, of whom he cites a passage from the *Commentarii in Esaiam* and a phrase (*res incorporalis corporalibus oculis non videtur*, «Something non-bodily is not seen by bodily eyes») actually absent from Jerome's extant writings⁴⁹. «I wanted to insert these statements of such great men on such an important topic», Augustine concludes:

not in order that you should think that you ought to follow the mind of any human being as if it possessed the authority of the canonical scripture but in order that those who hold another view may try to see with the mind what is true and seek God in the simplicity of their heart [*Wis* 1:1], so that they do not criticize such learned commentators on the divine scriptures⁵⁰.

Thus we realise that the distinction between seeing and believing, recommended by Augustine as a criterion for evaluating the content of *De videndo deo*, performs a twofold function. On the one hand, it involves the downsizing of Ambrose's doctrine (which Augustine himself shares) to the rank of a mere theological opinion, susceptible as such to be questioned. On the other hand, the distinc-

⁴⁷ Ibid., 21, 50, p. 325.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 23, 54, p. 331.

⁴⁹ Cfr. Agostino, *Vedere Dio*, cit., p. 91, footnote 127.

⁵⁰ Augustinus, *De videndo deo*, ed. A. Goldbacher, cit., 23, 54, p. 330.

tion allows Augustine to limit the doubts to the sole case of the spiritual body, confirming the impossibility of seeing God with the eyes of the «animal» body and underlining the harmony of Ambrose's position on the future vision of God with rational evidence and biblical faith. For both these reasons, the distinction between seeing and believing is really a major key to understanding Augustine's *De videndo deo*.

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