

# Christian Platonism

Rediscovering Ancient Wisdom

## The Great Prayer of St. Augustine

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*Art: Unknown.*

BETWEEN the time of his conversion and his baptism, St. Augustine retired with his family and friends to a villa in Casciago in the beautiful lake region north of Milan. There he wrote several dialogues in the manner of Cicero, including the *Soliloquies*. Years later Augustine described his conversion in the *Confessions*, but here we have, as it were, a direct window into his mind at this important period of his life. The *Soliloquies* opens with an inspired and impassioned prayer — full of phrases from the Neoplatonist Plotinus and the Bible.



While I was turning over in my mind many and divers matters, searching ceaselessly and intently through many a day for my very own self and my good, and what evil should be avoided, all at once a voice spoke to me— whether it was myself or another inside or outside of me I do not know, for that is the very thing I am endeavoring to find out. Reason thereupon spoke to me as follows:

*Reason.* Now then, suppose you had discovered something, to what would you consign it, in order that you might proceed to other matters?

*Augustine.* To memory, of course.

R. Is memory of such virtue that it well preserves all that has been thought out?

A. That is difficult; in fact, it is impossible.

R. It must be written down, then. But, what are you going to do now that your poor health shirks the task of writing? These matters ought not to be dictated, for they demand real solitude.

A. You speak the truth. Wherefore, I really do not know what I am to do.

2.

O God, the Founder of the Universe, grant me first of all that I may fittingly supplicate Thee; next, that I may so act that I may be worthy of a hearing from Thee; finally, I beg Thee to set me free.

O God, through whom all those things, which of themselves would not exist, strive to be.

O God, who dost not permit to perish even that which is self-destructive.

O God, who from nothing hast created this world which every eye sees to be most beautiful.

O God, who dost not cause evil, and who dost cause that it become not most evil.

O God, who, to those few who have their refuge in that which truly is, dost show that evil is nothing.

O God, through whom the universe, even with its sinister side, is perfect.

O God, by whose ordinance the uttermost discord is as naught, since the less perfect things are in harmony with the more perfect.'

O God, whom everything loves which is capable of loving whether knowingly or unknowingly.

O God, in whom are all things—and yet the shamefulfulness of every creature does not shame Thee, their wickedness does not harm Thee, nor docs their error deceive Thee.

O God, who hast not willed that any save the pure should know the True.

O God, the Father of Truth, the Father of Wisdom, Father of True and Supreme Life, Father of Happiness, Father of the Good and the Beautiful, Father of Intelligible Light, Father of our watching and our enlightenment, Father of the covenant by which we are admonished to return to Thee.

3.

I call upon Thee, O God the Truth, in whom and by whom and through whom all those things are true which are true.

O God, Wisdom, in whom and by whom and through whom all those are wise who are wise.

O God, True and Supreme Life, in whom and by whom and through whom all those things live which truly and perfectly live.

O God, Happiness, in whom and by whom and through whom all those things are happy which are happy.

O God, the Good and the Beautiful, in whom and by whom and through whom all those things are good and beautiful which are good and beautiful.

O God, Intelligible Light, in whom and by whom and through whom all those things which have intelligible light have their intelligible light.

O God, whose domain is the whole world unknown to sense.  
 O God, from whose realm law is promulgated even in these regions.  
 O God, from whom to turn away is to fall, to whom to turn is to rise again, in whom to abide is to stand firm.  
 O God, from whom to depart is to die, to whom to return is to be revived, in whom to dwell is to live.  
 O God, whom no one loses unless deceived, whom no one seeks unless admonished, whom no one finds unless he is purified.  
 O God, whom to abandon is to perish, whom to heed is to love, whom to see is to possess.  
 O God, to whom Faith moves us, Hope raises us, Charity unites us.  
 O God, through whom we overcome the enemy, Thee do I pray.  
 O God, through whom we obtain that we do not altogether perish.  
 O God, by whom we are admonished to be ever watchful.  
 O God, through whom we discern the good from the evil.  
 O God, through whom we flee evil and follow after good.  
 O God, through whom we are not overcome by afflictions.  
 O God, through whom we fittingly serve and fittingly rule.  
 O God, through whom we learn that that is alien to us which once we thought was meet for us, and that is meet which we used to think was alien.  
 O God, through whom we cling not to the charms and lures of evil.  
 O God, through whom deprivations do not abase us.  
 O God, through whom what is better in us is not under the dominion of our lower self.  
 O God, through whom death is swallowed up in victory.  
 O God, who dost convert us, stripping us of that which is not and clothing us with that which is.  
 O God, who makest us worthy to be heard.  
 O God, who strengthenest us; who leadest us into all truth.  
 O God, who speakest to us of all good things; who dost not drive us out of our mind, nor permittest that anyone else do so.  
 O God, who callest us back to the way; who leadest us to the gate; who grantest that it is opened to those who knock.  
 O God, who givest us the bread of life.  
 O God, through whom we thirst for the cup, which when it is drunk we shall thirst no more.  
 O God, who dost convince the world of sin, of justice, and of judgment.  
 O God, through whom we are not shaken by those who have no faith.  
 O God, through whom we denounce the error of those who think that the merits of souls are naught before Thee.  
 O God, through whom we do not serve weak and beggarly elements.  
 O God, who dost cleanse us, who dost make us ready for divine rewards, graciously come to me.

#### 4.

Whatever I have said, come to my aid, Thou, the one God, the one, eternal, true substance in whom there is no strife, no disorder, no change, no need, no death; where there is supreme harmony, supreme clarity, supreme permanence, supreme fullness, supreme life; where there is no deficiency and no excess; where the One begetting and the One begotten is One.

O God, who art served by all things which serve, who art obeyed by every good soul.

O God, by whose laws the poles revolve, the stars follow their courses, the sun rules the day, and the moon presides over the night; and all the world maintains, as far as this world of sense allows, the wondrous stability of things by means of the orders and recurrences of seasons: through the days by the changing of light and darkness, through the months by the moon's progressions and declines, through the years by the successions of spring, summer, autumn, and winter, through the cycles by the

completion of the sun's course, through the great eras of time by the return of the stars to their starting points.

O God, by whose ever-enduring laws the varying movement of movable things is not suffered to be disturbed, and is always restored to a relative stability by the controls of the encompassing ages.

O God, by whose laws the choice of the soul is free, and rewards to the good and chastisements to the wicked are meted out in accord with inexorable and universal destiny.

O God, from whom all good things flow even unto us, and by whom all evil things are kept away from us.

O God, above whom, beyond whom, and without whom nothing exists.

O God, under whom everything is, in whom everything is, with whom everything is.

O God, who hast made man to Thine image and likeness, a fact which he acknowledges who knows himself.

Hear, hear, O hear me, my God, my Lord, my King, my Father, my Cause, my Hope, my Wealth, my Honor, my Home, my Native Land, my Salvation, my Light, my Life.

Hear, hear, O hear me, in that way of Thine well known to a select few.

## 5.

Thee alone do I love; Thee alone do I follow; Thee alone do I seek; Thee alone am I ready to serve, for Thou alone hast just dominion; under Thy sway do I long to be.

Order, I beg Thee, and command what Thou wilt, but heal and open my ears, so that with them I may hear Thy words.

Heal and open my eyes so that with them I may perceive Thy wishes.

Banish from me my senselessness, so that I may know Thee.

Tell me where I should turn that I may behold Thee; and I hope I shall do all Thou hast commanded me.

Look, I beseech Thee, upon Thy prodigal, O Lord, kindest Father; already have I been punished enough; long enough have I served Thine enemies whom Thou hast beneath Thy feet; long enough have I been the plaything of deceits. Receive me Thy servant as I flee from them, for they took me in a stranger when I was fleeing from Thee.

I realize I must return to Thee. Let Thy door be open to my knocking. Teach me how to come to Thee. Nothing else do I have but willingness. Naught else do I know save that fleeting and perishable things are to be spurned, certain and eternal things to be sought after. This I do, O Father, because this is all I know, but how I am to reach Thee I know not.

Do Thou inspire me, show me, give me what I need for my journey.

If it is by faith that they find Thee who have recourse to Thee, give me faith; if it is through virtue, give me virtue; if it is by knowledge, give knowledge to me. Grant me increase of faith, of hope, and of charity. O how marvelous and extraordinary is Thy goodness.

## 6.

To Thee do I appeal, and once more I beg of Thee the very means by which appeal is made to Thee. For, if Thou shouldst abandon us, we are lost; but Thou dost not abandon us, because Thou art the Supreme Good whom no one ever rightly sought and entirely failed to find. And, indeed, every one hast rightly sought Thee whom Thou hast enabled to seek Thee aright. Grant that I may seek Thee, my Father; save me from error. When I seek Thee, let me not find aught else but Thee, I beseech Thee, Father. But, if there is in me any vain desire, do Thou Thyself cleanse me and make me fit to look upon Thee.

With regard to the health of this my mortal body, so long as I am ignorant of its usefulness to me or to those whom I love, I entrust it to Thee, O wisest and best of Fathers, and I shall pray for it as Thou shalt in good time advise me. This only I shall ask of Thine extreme kindness, that Thou convertest me wholly to Thee, and that Thou allowest nothing to prevent me when I wend my way to Thee. I beg Thee to

command, while I move and bear this my body, that I may be pure, generous, just, and prudent; that I may be a perfect lover and knower of Thy Wisdom; that I may be worthy of Thy dwelling place, and that I may in fact dwell in Thy most blessed kingdom. Amen. Amen. (Source: *Soliloquies* 1.1–6; Migne PL 32 cols 869–872; tr. Gilligan pp. 343–350).



UNDE ARDET, INDE LUCET.

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Written by John Uebersax

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