

From On Christian Doctrine<sup>1</sup>

From Book One

II

[2] All doctrine concerns either things or signs, but things are learned by signs. Strictly speaking, I have here called a "thing" that which is not used to signify something else, like wood, stone, cattle, and so on; but not that wood concerning which we read that Moses cast it into bitter waters that their bitterness might be dispelled,<sup>2</sup> nor that stone which Jacob placed at his head,<sup>3</sup> nor that beast which Abraham sacrificed in place of his son.<sup>4</sup> For these are things in such a way that they are also signs of other things.<sup>5</sup> There are other signs whose whole use is in signifying, like words. For no one uses words except for the purpose of signifying something. From this may be understood what we call "signs"; they are things used to signify something. Thus every sign is also a thing, for that which is not a thing is nothing at all; but not every thing is also a sign. And thus in this distinction between things and signs, when we speak of things, we shall so speak that, although some of them may be used to signify something else, this fact shall not disturb the arrangement we have made to speak of things as such first and of signs later. We should bear in mind that now we are to consider what things are, not what they signify beyond themselves.

From Book Two

I

[1] Just as I began, when I was writing about things, by warning that no one should consider them except as they are, without reference to what they signify beyond themselves, now when I am discussing signs I wish it understood that no one should consider them for what they are but rather for their value as signs which signify something else. A sign is a thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses. Thus if we see a track, we think of the animal that made the track; if we see smoke, we know that there is a fire which causes it; if we hear the voice of a living being, we attend to the emotion it expresses; and when a trumpet sounds, a soldier should know whether it is necessary to advance or to retreat, or whether the battle demands some other response.

[2] Among signs, some are natural and others are conventional. Those are natural which, without any desire or intention of signifying, make us aware of something beyond themselves, like smoke which signifies fire. It does this without any will to signify, for even when smoke appears alone, observation and memory of experience with things bring a recognition of an underlying fire. The track of a passing animal belongs to this class, and the face of one who is wrathful or sad signifies his emotion even when he does not wish to

1. Translated by D. W. Robertson Jr., who sometimes adds clarifying words or phrases in brackets.  
2. Exodus 15:25.  
3. Genesis 28:11.

4. Genesis 22:13.

5. According to St. Augustine, the "wood" is a sign of the cross. The "stone" and the "beast" represent the human nature of Christ [translator's note].

show that he is wrathful or sad, just as other emotions are signified by the expression even when we do not deliberately set out to show them. But it is not proposed here to discuss signs of this type. Since the class formed a division of my subject, I could not disregard it completely, and this notice of it will suffice.

II

[3] Conventional signs are those which living creatures show to one another for the purpose of conveying, in so far as they are able, the motion of their spirits or something which they have sensed or understood. Nor is there any other reason for signifying, or for giving signs, except for bringing forth and transferring to another mind the action of the mind in the person who makes the sign. We propose to consider and to discuss this class of signs in so far as men are concerned with it, for even signs given by God and contained in the Holy Scriptures are of this type also, since they were presented to us by the men who wrote them. Animals also have signs which they use among themselves, by means of which they indicate their appetites. For a cock who finds food makes a sign with his voice to the hen so that she runs to him. And the dove calls his mate with a cry or is called by her in turn, and there are many similar examples which may be adduced. Whether these signs, or the expression or cry of a man in pain, express the motion of the spirit without intention of signifying or are truly shown as signs is not in question here and does not pertain to our discussion, and we remove this division of the subject from this work as superfluous.

III

[4] Among the signs by means of which men express their meanings to one another, some pertain to the sense of sight, more to the sense of hearing, and very few to the other senses. For when we nod, we give a sign only to the sight of the person whom we wish by that sign to make a participant in our will. Some signify many things through the motions of their hands, and actors give signs to those who understand, with the motions of all their members as if narrating things to their eyes. And banners and military standards visibly indicate the will of the captains. And all of these things are like so many visible words. More signs, as I have said, pertain to the ears, and most of these consist of words. But the trumpet, the flute, and the harp make sounds which are not only pleasing but also significant, although as compared with the number of verbal signs the number of signs of this kind are few. For words have come to be predominant among men for signifying whatever the mind conceives if they wish to communicate it to anyone. However, Our Lord gave a sign with the odor of the ointment with which His feet were anointed,<sup>6</sup> and the taste of the sacrament of His body and blood signified what He wished,<sup>7</sup> and when the woman was healed by touching the hem of His garment,<sup>8</sup> something was signified. Nevertheless, a multitude of innumerable signs by means of which men express their thoughts is made

6. In the gospel of St. John (12:3-8), Mary anoints Christ's feet with precious ointment. Later in *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine interprets the "good

(3:12,18).

7. Matthew 26:28; Luke 22:19-20.

8. Matthew 9:20-22.

up of words. And I could express the meaning of all signs of the type here touched upon in words, but I would not be able at all to make the meanings of words clear by these signs.

## IV

[5] But because vibrations in the air soon pass away and remain no longer than they sound, signs of words have been constructed by means of letters. Thus words are shown to the eyes, not in themselves but through certain signs which stand for them. These signs could not be common to all peoples because of the sin of human dissension which arises when one people seizes the leadership for itself. A sign of this pride is that tower<sup>2</sup> erected in the heavens where impious men deserved that not only their minds but also their voices should be dissonant.

## X

[15] There are two reasons why things written are not understood: they are obscured either by unknown or by ambiguous signs. For signs are either literal or figurative. They are called literal when they are used to designate those things on account of which they were instituted; thus we say *bos* [ox] when we mean an animal of a herd because all men using the Latin language call it by that name just as we do. Figurative signs occur when that thing which we designate by a literal sign is used to signify something else; thus we say "ox" and by that syllable understand the animal which is ordinarily designated by that word, but again by that animal we understand an evangelist, as is signified in the Scripture, according to the interpretation of the Apostle, when it says, "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn."<sup>1</sup>

## XI

[16] Against unknown literal signs the sovereign remedy is a knowledge of languages. And Latin-speaking men, whom we have here undertaken to instruct, need two others for a knowledge of the Divine Scriptures, Hebrew and Greek,<sup>2</sup> so that they may turn back to earlier exemplars if the infinite variety of Latin translations gives rise to any doubts. Again, in these books we frequently find untranslated Hebrew words, like *amen*, *alleluia*, *racha*, *hosanna*, and so on, of which some, although they could be translated, have been preserved from antiquity on account of their holier authority, like *amen* and *alleluia*; others, like the other two mentioned above, are said not to be translatable into another language. For there are some words in some languages which cannot be translated into other languages. And this is especially true of interjections which signify the motion of the spirit rather than any part of a rational concept. And these two belong to this class: *racha* is said to be an expression of indignation and *hosanna* an expression of delight. But a knowledge of these two languages is not necessary for these few things, which are easy to know and to discover, but, as we have said, it is necessary

on account of the variety of translations. We can enumerate those who have translated the Scriptures from Hebrew into Greek, but those who have translated them into Latin are innumerable. In the early times of the faith when anyone found a Greek codex, and he thought that he had some facility in both languages, he attempted to translate it.

## From Book Three

## XXIX

[40] Lettered men should know, moreover, that all those modes of expression which the grammarians designate with the Greek word *tropes* were used by our authors, and more abundantly and copiously than those who do not know them and have learned about such expressions elsewhere are able to suppose or believe. Those who know these tropes, however, will recognize them in the sacred letters, and this knowledge will be of considerable assistance in understanding them. But it is not proper to teach them to the ignorant here, lest we seem to be teaching the art of grammar. I advise that they be learned elsewhere, although I have already advised the same thing before in the second book where I discussed the necessary knowledge of languages. For letters from which grammar takes its name—the Greeks call letters *grām-mata*—are indeed signs of sounds made by the articulate voice with which we speak. And not only examples of all these tropes are found in reading the sacred books, but also the names of some of them, like *allegoria*, *aenigma*, *parabola*.<sup>3</sup> And yet almost all of these tropes, said to be learned in the liberal arts, find a place in the speech of those who have never heard the lectures of grammarians and are content with the usage of common speech. For who does not say, "So may you flourish"? And this is the trope called metaphor. "Who does not use the word *piscina* [basin, pool, pond, tank, or other large container for water] for something which neither contains fish nor was constructed for the use of fish, when the word itself is derived from *piscis* [fish]? This trope is called catachresis."<sup>4</sup>

[41] It would be tedious to describe other examples of this kind. For the vulgar speech even extends to those tropes which are more remarkable because they imply the opposite of what is said, like that which is called irony or antiphrasis.<sup>5</sup> Now irony indicates by inflection what it wishes to be understood, as when we say to a man who is doing evil, "You are doing well." Antiphrasis, however, does not rely on inflection that it may signify the contrary, but either uses its own words whose origin is from the contrary, like *lucus*, "groove," so called *quod minime luceat*, "because it has very little light"; or it indicates that a thing is so when it wishes to imply the contrary, as when we seek to obtain what is not there and we are told, "There is plenty." Or, by adding words we may indicate that what we say is to be taken in a contrary sense, as when we say, "Beware of him, for he is a good man." And what unlearned man does not say such things without knowing at all what these tropes are or what they are called? Yet an awareness of them is nec-

3. Teaching moral lessons by means of extended metaphors. "Allegoria": saying one thing to mean another. "Aenigma": allusive or obscure speech.  
4. A strained use of words.

5. From *anti*, meaning reverse, and *phrasis*, meaning diction: saying one thing and meaning the contrary.