# Summa Theologica Question: 12

St. Thomas Aquinas

HOW GOD IS KNOWN BY US (THIRTEEN ARTICLES)

## Article: 1 Whether any created intellect can see the essence of God?

 Objection 1: It seems that no created intellect can see the essence of God. For Chrysostom (Hom. xiv. in Joan.) commenting on Jn. 1:18, "No man hath seen God at any time," says: "Not prophets only, but neither angels nor archangels have seen God. For how can a creature see what is increatable?" Dionysius also says (Div. Nom. i), speaking of God: "Neither is there sense, nor image, nor opinion, nor reason, nor knowledge of Him."

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 Objection 3: Further, the created intellect knows only existing things. For what falls first under the apprehension of the intellect is being. Now God is not something existing; but He is rather super-existence, as Dionysius says (Div. Nom. iv). Therefore God is not intelligible; but above all intellect.

Objection 4: Further, there must be some proportion between the knower and the known, since the known is the perfection of the knower. But no proportion exists between the created intellect and God; for there is an infinite distance between them. Therefore the created intellect cannot see the essence of God.

On the contrary, It is written: "We shall see Him as He is" (1 Jn. 2:2).

I answer that, **Since everything is knowable according as it is actual, God, Who is pure act without any admixture of potentiality, is in Himself supremely knowable. But what is supremely knowable in itself, may not be knowable to a particular intellect, on account of the excess of the intelligible object above the intellect; as, for example, the sun, which is supremely visible, cannot be seen by the bat by reason of its excess of light**. **Therefore some who considered this, held that no created intellect can see the essence of God. This opinion, however, is not tenable. For as the ultimate beatitude of man consists in the use of his highest function, which is the operation of his intellect; if we suppose that the created intellect could never see God, it would either never attain to beatitude, or its beatitude would consist in something else beside God; which is opposed to faith. For the ultimate perfection of the rational creature is to be found in that which is the principle of its being; since a thing is perfect so far as it attains to its principle. Further the same opinion is also against reason. For there resides in every man a natural desire to know the cause of any effect which he sees; and thence arises wonder in men. But if the intellect of the rational creature could not reach so far as to the first cause of things, the natural desire would remain void. Hence it must be absolutely granted that the blessed see the essence of God.**

 Reply to Objection 1: **Both of these authorities speak of the vision of comprehension**. Hence Dionysius premises immediately before the words cited, "He is universally to all incomprehensible," etc. Chrysostom likewise after the words quoted says: "He says this of the most certain vision of the Father, which is such a perfect consideration and comprehension as the Father has of the Son."...

Reply to Objection 3: God is not said to be not existing as if He did not exist at all, but because He exists above all that exists; inasmuch as He is His own existence. Hence it does not follow that He cannot be known at all, but that **He exceeds every kind of knowledge; which means that He is not comprehended.**

Reply to Objection 4: Proportion is twofold. In one sense it means a certain relation of one quantity to another, according as double, treble and equal are species of proportion. In another sense every relation of one thing to another is called proportion. **And in this sense there can be a proportion of the creature to God, inasmuch as it is related to Him as the effect of its cause, and as potentiality to its act; and in this way the created intellect can be proportioned to know God.**

## Article: 4 Whether any created intellect by its natural powers can see the Divine essence?

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**Therefore the created intellect cannot see the essence of God, unless God by His grace unites Himself to the created intellect, as an object made intelligible to it.**

## Article: 6 Whether of those who see the essence of God, one sees more perfectly than another?

 ... **Of those who see the essence of God, one sees Him more perfectly than another. This, indeed, does not take place as if one had a more perfect similitude of God than another, since that vision will not spring from any similitude; but it will take place because one intellect will have a greater power or faculty to see God than another. The faculty of seeing God, however, does not belong to the created intellect naturally, but is given to it by the light of glory, which establishes the intellect in a kind of "deiformity," as appears from what is said above, in the preceding article.** Hence the intellect which has more of the light of glory will see God the more perfectly; **and he will have a fuller participation of the light of glory who has more charity; because where there is the greater charity, there is the more desire; and desire in a certain degree makes the one desiring apt and prepared to receive the object desired.** Hence he who possesses the more charity, will see God the more perfectly, and will be the more beatified.

Reply to Objection 1: **In the words,"We shall see Him as He is," the conjunction "as" determines the mode of vision on the part of the object seen, so that the meaning is, we shall see Him to be as He is, because we shall see His existence, which is His essence.** But it does not determine the mode of vision on the part of the one seeing; as if the meaning was that the mode of seeing God will be as perfect as is the perfect mode of God's existence.

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## Article: 7 Whether those who see the essence of God comprehend Him?

 Objection 1: It seems that those who see the divine essence, comprehend God. For the Apostle says (Phil. 3:12): "But I follow after, if I may by any means comprehend [Douay: 'apprehend']." But the Apostle did not follow in vain; for he said (1 Cor. 9:26): "I . . . so run, not as at an uncertainty." Therefore he comprehended; and in the same way, others also, whom he invites to do the same, saying: "So run that you may comprehend."

 

 I answer that, **It is impossible for any created intellect to comprehend God**; yet "for the mind to attain to God in some degree is great beatitude," as Augustine says (De Verb. Dim., Serm. xxxvii).

... **But no created intellect can attain to that perfect mode of the knowledge of the Divine intellect whereof it is intrinsically capable.** ... Reply to Objection 1: **"Comprehension" is twofold: in one sense it is taken strictly and properly, according as something is included in the one comprehending; and thus in no way is God comprehended either by intellect, or in any other way; forasmuch as He is infinite and cannot be included in any finite being; so that no finite being can contain Him infinitely, in the degree of His own infinity. In this sense we now take comprehension. But in another sense "comprehension" is taken more largely as opposed to "non-attainment"; for he who attains to anyone is said to comprehend him when he attains to him. And in this sense God is comprehended by the blessed, according to the words, "I held him, and I will not let him go" (Cant 3:4); in this sense also are to be understood the words quoted from the Apostle concerning comprehension.** ...

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## Article: 12 Whether God can be known in this life by natural reason?

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**Our natural knowledge begins from sense. Hence our natural knowledge can go as far as it can be led by sensible things. But our mind cannot be led by sense so far as to see the essence of God; because the sensible effects of God do not equal the power of God as their cause. Hence from the knowledge of sensible things the whole power of God cannot be known; nor therefore can His essence be seen. But because they are His effects and depend on their cause, we can be led from them so far as to know of God "whether He exists," and to know of Him what must necessarily belong to Him, as the first cause of all things, exceeding all things caused by Him.**

 Reply to Objection 3: **As the knowledge of God's essence is by grace, it belongs only to the good; but the knowledge of Him by natural reason can belong to both good and bad;**