

The Mystical Meaning of
NUMBERS

IN SACRED SCRIPTURE

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SAINT ISIDORE OF SEVILLE

Translated by Fr. Robert Nixon, OSB

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“In measure, and in number, and in
weight Thou hast ordered all things.”

—WISDOM 11:21



CONTENTS

<i>Translator's Introduction</i>	ix
The Life of St. Isidore of Seville: From the <i>Breviarium</i>	
<i>Romanum ex Decreto SS. Concilii Tridentini Restitutum</i>	xiii
Author's Introduction	1
Unity, or One	5
Two	17
Three	25
Four.....	33
Five.....	41
Six	47
Seven	53
Eight.....	71
Nine	77
Ten	81
Eleven.....	89
Twelve.....	95
Epilogue: From a Sermon of St. Isidore of Seville	
in the <i>Breviarium Romanum ex Decreto SS. Concilii</i>	
<i>Tridentini Restitutum</i>	103



UNITY, OR ONE

ONE IS THE smallest of the numbers, which is not able to be divided further into any other whole number. Technically, unity or *one* is not really a number at all, since if there is only one of something, it cannot truly be said that there is ‘a number’ of that thing. But one or unity is the seed and basis of all subsequent numbers.

For out of unity, all subsequent numbers emanate or are created. For this reason, a unity or *unit* is the necessary measure of anything. Additions of units are the cause of all *increase*, while numbers of units are also the means of identifying or enumerating *decreases*. For all increases in number arise from the additions of a unit, or a series or collections of units. Similarly, if units are progressively taken from any number, eventually you will arrive at *one*, or a unit or unity.

For example, if there is ten of something, this number will not be increased unless a unit, or a succession or

collection of units, is added to that ten. And if you remove units from that ten successively, you will eventually arrive at one, or a unity.

A unit is, by its very nature, indivisible, insofar as it is a unit. And a unit, insofar as it is a unit, is necessarily also complete in itself.

Translator's note

Although Saint Isidore does not speak here of fractions, the mathematical and practical possibilities of fractions does not contradict what he says. For example, if one whole is divided into two the result is one half, and if that one half is divided in two, the result is one quarter. 'One whole', insofar as it is and remains 'one whole,' cannot be divided. And, to qualify as 'one whole,' it is necessarily complete in itself.

The most perfect example of unity is God Himself, who is the fundamental unity from which all that exists is generated and made possible. And there is one Mediator between God and man, indivisible and complete in Himself, the man Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, is also one.

Translator's note

Saint Isidore here demonstrates that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity does not contradict the unity of God, for this unity (which is, by its nature, only one and the same) exists in and is essential to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Holy Mother Church is also defined and identified as one. That unity or oneness is an essential element of the Holy Church is symbolically revealed in the fact that when the prophet Ezekiel witnessed in a vision the threshold of the temple in the new Jerusalem being measured, it was one rod in length.

Translator's note

The vision referred to here is found in Ezekiel 40:1–8. The relevant passage, which highlights symbolically the essential nature of unity to the Church, is reproduced below:

In the visions of God, [the angel of the Lord] brought me into the land of Israel, and set me upon a very high mountain: upon which there was a building like a great city, bending towards the south. And he brought me in there, and behold a man, whose appearance was like the appearance of brass, with a line of flax in his hand, and a measuring reed in his hand, and he stood in the gate [. . .] and he measured the breadth of the temple. It was one length, and the height was one reed. And he came to the gate that looked toward the east, and he went up the steps thereof: and he measured the breadth of the threshold of the gate. And it was one reed, that is, one threshold was one reed broad. [. . .] And every little chamber was one reed long, and one

reed broad. (...) And the threshold of the gate by the porch of the gate within, was one reed.

This symbolism of the essential unity of the Church is also expressed in the ark of Noah. For when the Lord instructs Noah on the measurements of the ark, He says: "And in one cubit you shall finish it above."¹ Noah is also told that there should be one single door to this ark—also symbolizing the essential unity of the Church, which is truly the ark of our salvation. For, as Saint Paul tell us, there is one baptism, by which admission to the Church is conferred, and likewise there is one single faith which is everywhere and at all times professed within the one Church of God.²

The universe (by its very nature as a *universe*, which, by definition, contains all that there is in creation) is also one. And when we perceive the one sun, it produces but one light. It is on account of this reality that wise philosophers have always grasped the fundamental unity of the world or universe. For it exists and functions in an underlying harmony or concord, whereby all the parts and actions are bound together as one by a kind of affinity, co-operation or friendship. And all the parts and actions of the universe are mutually connected (even if these connections are not

¹ Gen. 6:16.

² See Ephesians 4:5.

always immediately perceptible), such that, viewed as a whole, it operates as a single, united system or cosmos.

A unity is thus that which cannot be divided, for, wherever there is one, it must be a totality in itself. An example of this indivisibility is apparent if we consider a geometrical straight line. Now, such a line cannot be divided along its width or breadth, because a line, in geometry, is understood as having no breadth, but only length. If it had breadth, it would not be a line, but a plane.

The number one thus represents both indivisibility and completeness, both of which, as has been noted, find their perfect exemplar and archetype in the one God Himself. The unity of God is of a special and particular variety, which pertains to God alone.³ For it is the single primal and ultimate Unity. For God is in all things, and before all things, and beyond all things. He is one, and His attributes (including omnipotence, magnificence, and incomprehensibility) are also one, since they exist in indivisible unity and completeness. Hence Sacred Scripture declares emphatically this divine unity to be the very essence of God, and the essence of God to be supreme unity: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is One.”

³ From this point until the end of the present chapter, text from the *Libellus de Numeris* (*Small book on numbers*), also attributed to Saint Isidore, has been incorporated (PL LXXXIII:1293–1302). It continues his meditations and reflections on the nature of unity, and in particular, the essential unity of both God and man.

Who or what indeed is there in Heaven or on earth or under the earth which is similar or comparable to God—in power, in Trinity, in Unity, in divinity, in perfection of humanity? And therefore God is the “One and only,” for neither before, nor after, nor now, nor then, is anything or anyone who could be compared to Him. For the devil, who, in pride, dared to liken or compare himself to God (and thereby challenged the uniqueness or oneness of the Deity), was immediately cast down, and became instead the first among the creatures of hell.

Translator's note

The third- and fourth-century Pythagorean philosopher Iamblichus expresses the divine nature of unity beautifully and eloquently, in the somewhat similar terms to those used by Isidore:⁴

All things have been ordered by Unity, because it contains everything potentially. [. . .] And God coincides with this primal Unity, since He is the origin of everything which exists, just as Unity is in the case of number. Unity is the beginning, middle and end of all quantity, of all size, and of every other quality. And just as without Unity there can be no subsistence or existence of anything at all, so also without it there is no possible knowledge of anything. For it is a pure light, supreme over all that exists, and it is sun-like and Monarch of

⁴ Iamblichus, *The Theology of Arithmetic*, 1.

all the universe. Thus in each of these respects, Unity bears the image of the nature of God Himself.

Among the creations of God, there are certain things which, though there are many individual instances of them, are still described as being “one,” reflecting their indivisibility and completeness. Speaking in this way, it is said: “Man is one,” or “The soul is one.” Similarly, we say “one faith,”⁵ “one baptism,”⁶ “one love,” “one hope,”⁷ “one faith,” “one peace,” “one chalice,” and “one bread.”⁸

We shall speak now of some of these examples, as God grants us, showing why they are mystically said to be “one,” although they do not consist of single instances, but rather many or several.

To begin with man, in the beginning we discover the God created one man. And from the rib of this single man, Adam, one woman, Eve, was formed. And all humanity spoke one language, until the time of the Tower of Babel.

We are said to have one, single father to our faith, Abraham, and from Adam until the time of Christ, there was no other man who had this particular name. Of him it was said: “Abraham believed in God, and it was counted unto him as righteousness.”⁹ But did not Abel also believe in

⁵ Eph. 4:5.

⁶ Eph. 4:5.

⁷ Eph. 1:4.

⁸ 1 Cor. 1:17.

⁹ Gen. 15:16; Rom. 4:3; Jas. 2:23.

God, and receive the crown of martyrdom? Did not Enoch also believe in God, who was taken up by the Lord while still alive in the body? Was not Noah, who was counted as righteous, a believer in God, for the Lord instructed him to build the ark and liberated him and those with him by means of it? But neither Abel nor Enoch nor Noah are described as being “our father in faith?” The reason is that, although there were isolated individuals who believed in God, it was only since the time of Abraham that such faith was maintained with continuity and unity. To represent the indivisibility and completeness of this faith in the One God, it is described as having one founder or father, namely Abraham.

Next, we may consider in what sense man, who is created in the image and likeness of the God who is supremely One, is also truly said to be “one.”

Translator's note

This oneness of man is represented in the singular person of Adam created by God, and also in the fact that “man” in the singular is used to speak of all human beings in general, e.g., “Man does not live of bread alone.” The term ‘individual’ literally means ‘indivisible,’ and each human being is necessarily a complete entity. Thus, the oneness of the human being is held to be a reflection of the transcendent unity of the Deity. This perspective imparts a deep mystical significance to Christ’s prayer: “May they all may be one; as thou, Father, are Me,

*and I in Thee, may they also may be One in us,*¹⁰ *which could equally be rendered as “May each one of them be one . . .”*

Man is formed from two substances, the soul and the body, but these two substances are so intimately and necessarily conjoined that together they form a single entity, the human being. In each of the two elements of which this human entity is formed, it is possible to detect or to describe multiple aspect. For example, in the body of a human being, there are seen, without the least doubt, to be nine elements. There are the four physical elements—namely, earth, water, air, and fire. Out of these are found the subsequent five varieties which are generated therefrom—namely, salt, grass, flowers, stones, and clouds. So that you may perceive this more readily, read carefully what follows. In the mass of the body is the *earth*; the element of *water* forms sweat and saliva; *air* is the substance of the breath; while *fire* is manifested in the warmth of the blood and the capacity of the digestion to ‘cook’ further the food it receives. *Salt* is present in the saltiness of blood, sweat, and tears. *Grass* is manifested in the hairs of the head and the body; while *flowers* are exhibited in the variety of colors of the eyes. *Stones* are present in the hardness and density of bones, and it is indeed fitting that stones are sometimes referred to as ‘the bones of the earth.’ Finally, the fluid and nebulous quality of *clouds* is

¹⁰ Jn. 17:21.

revealed in the fluctuating and ever-mobile thoughts, cogitations and emotions of the mind.

And to these nine substances (the four basic physical elements, and the five growths which emerge from these), the human body also includes the joints of the bones, the principal of which number no less than 365. And the number of small joints and connections is virtually countless. The principal veins of the body are likewise 365, with numberless minor veins and capillaries. And this is not to mention vast multitude of the nerves and hairs, and so forth.

Thus the human body is truly a microcosmos, or a small universe. Like the macrocosm, or greater universe, it is fundamentally and essentially one, despite the virtually infinite multitude of its constituent elements, for it is complete and integrated as a single harmonious unit, as the apostle Saint Paul teaches us.¹¹

The soul is the other of the two principal constitutive substances of the human person. What exactly is this soul, we may wonder? Does it live, or not? And if it lives, is its life one of blessedness or of misery? What, therefore, is the soul?

The soul is neither of the Heavens nor of the earth; nor is it of air, fire or water. It is not itself God, nor is it generated by the soul of either the father or the mother. It is neither seen, nor heard, nor smelt, nor tasted. Hence this

¹¹ See 1 Corinthians 12:12–27.

mysterious and otherwise inexplicable force of life is given directly by God Himself, and created *ex nihilo*; for it can be explained in no other way. Scripture testifies to the fact that the soul, which is the force of life itself, is a direct creative emanation or gift of God, when the Lord declares through the prophet Isaiah: "My Spirit shall go forth from me, and I have created all breath,"¹² that is, every soul.

The soul is the rational and sensible life force, spiritually imparting vitality, and, at the command of the Creator, invisibly and miraculously causing all the members of the body, both internal and external, to live and move, for without the soul the body would be inanimate. The principal functions of the soul are sensing, exercising judgment on that which is perceived, and thinking or reflecting, and willing or desiring. When each of these functions operate well, then the image of God within the human being actively lives; and when they operate both well and virtuously in a manner that is pleasing to God and His angels, then it becomes, in its action and operation, a true throne of the Holy Trinity.

O Reader, whoever you are, you are a union of the body and soul and it behooves you to emulate the supreme Unity of God, made flesh in Christ, and reflected also in the saints. Learn from Christ, humility; from Saint Peter, devotion; from Saint John, love; from Abraham, obedience;

¹² Is. 57:16.

from Lot, hospitality; from Isaac, patience; from Job, endurance; from Saint Joseph, chastity; and from Saint Mary Magdalene, true sorrow for sin. For these virtues and all others, though seemingly many, are inseparably united in God, whose attributes are all indivisible. And this glorious and divine unity is reflected in the virtues and character of each of the saints.