

Dreams and Visions Throughout Church History

Not only are dreams and visions prevalent in every dispensation of the Bible, they have also been a consistent part of Church history. In order to give you a clearer view of the Church's experience with dreams and visions throughout the last 2000 years, I offer the following examples.

1. Augustine — Rather than ignoring dreams as the contemporary Church has done, Augustine took the entire Twelfth Book in his *De Genesi ad Litteram* to explain his understanding of dreams and visions.

2. Polycarp — The book *Martyrdom of Polycarp* tells of Polycarp praying not long before his martyrdom, and being informed of what was shortly to happen through a symbolic vision. He saw the pillow under his head catch fire and realized that this image of destruction signified his own impending capture and death.

3. Justin Martyr — In his writings, Martyr said that dreams are sent by spirits. He believed that dreams are sent by both evil spirits and God.

4. Irenaeus — As Irenaeus refuted gnostic speculation in his writings, he indicated his clear view concerning dreams and the life of the Christian. In his principal work, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus commented appreciatively and intelligently on the dream of Peter in the tenth chapter of Acts; he believed that the dream itself was a proof of the authenticity of Peter's experience. Again, he stressed the legitimacy of Paul's dream at Troas. He also inferred from the dreams of Joseph in Matthew that Joseph's dreaming showed how close he was to the real God. In still another place, he explained that although God is Himself invisible to the eye directly, He gives us visions and dreams through which He conveys the likeness of His nature and glory.

5. Clement — In discussing the nature and meaning of sleep, Clement urged: "Let us not, then, who are sons of the true light, close the door against this light; but turning in on ourselves, illumining the eyes of the hidden man, and gazing on the truth itself, and receiving its streams, let us clearly and intelligibly reveal such dreams as are true.... Thus also such dreams as are true, in the view of him who reflects rightly, are the thoughts of a sober soul, undistracted for the time by the affections of the body, and counseling with itself in the best manner.... Wherefore always contemplating God, and by perpetual converse with Him inoculating the body with wakefulness, it raises man to equality with angelic grace, and from the practice of wakefulness it grasps the eternity of life" (*Stromata*, or *Miscellanies*).

6. Origen — In his great answer to the pagans, *Against Celsus*, Origen defended the visions of the Bible, saying: "...We, nevertheless, so far as we can, shall support our position, maintaining that, as it is a matter of belief that in a dream impressions have been brought before the minds of many, some relating to divine things, and others to future events of this life, and this either with clearness or in an enigmatic manner, a fact which is manifest to all who accept the doctrine of providence: so how is it absurd to say that

the mind which could receive impressions in a dream should be impressed also in a waking vision, for the benefit either of him on whom the impressions are made, or of those who are to hear the account of them from him?”

Having satisfied his parallel between dreams and visions, Origen then went on to discuss the nature of dreams. In *Contra Celsus*, Origen further declared that many Christians had been converted from their pagan ways by this kind of direct breakthrough into their lives in waking visions and dreams of the night. He made it clear that many such instances of this sort of conversion were known.

7. Tertullian — Tertullian devoted eight chapters of his work *A Treatise on the Soul*, or *De Anima*, to his study of sleep and dreams. He believed that all dream, and evidenced it by the movement of sleeping infants. He believed that dreams occur from four sources: demons, God, natural dreams that the soul creates, and finally “the ecstatic state and its peculiar conditions” or, in other words, the unconscious. Furthermore he states, “And thus we — who both acknowledge and reverence, even as we do the prophecies, modern visions as equally promised to us, and consider the other powers of the Holy Spirit as an agency of the Church for which also He was sent, administering all gifts in all, even as the Lord distributed to every one....”

8. Thascius Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage in 250 A.D. — In a letter to Florentius Pupianus he said, “Although I know that to some men dreams seem ridiculous and visions foolish, yet assuredly it is to such as would rather believe in opposition to the priest, than believe the priest.” In another letter he wrote that God guides the very councils of the Church by “many and manifest visions.” He commended the reader, Celerinus, because his conversion to the Church had come through a vision of the night.

9. Lactantius, chosen by Constantine the Great to tutor his son. — In his *Divine Institutes*, he included a chapter, “The Use of Reason in Religion; and of Dreams, Auguries, Oracles, and Similar Portents,” in which he cited examples to show that through dreams, a knowledge of the future is occasionally given to pagans as well as to Christians. His example of a logical fallacy is that of a man who has dreamed that he ought not believe in dreams.

10. Constantine — Lactantius writes of the heavenly vision that gave Constantine his great victory in 300 A.D. The story begins with Constantine being in desperate need and calling on God for help. “Accordingly he called on Him with earnest prayer and supplications that He would reveal to him Who He was, and stretch forth His right hand to help him in his present difficulties. And while he was thus praying with fervent entreaty, a most marvelous sign appeared to him from heaven, the account of which it might have been hard to believe had it been related by any other person. But since the victorious emperor himself long afterwards declared it to the writer of this history, when he was honored with his acquaintance and society, and confirmed his statement by an oath, who could hesitate to accredit the relation especially since the testimony of after-time has established its truth? He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the

heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, CONQUER BY THIS. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle.

“He said, moreover, that he doubted within himself what the import of this apparition could be. And while he continued to ponder the reason on its meaning, night suddenly came on; then in his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies. At dawn of day he arose, and communicated the marvel to his friends: and then, calling together the workers in gold and precious stones, he sat in the midst of them, and described to them the figure of the sign he had seen, bidding them represent it in gold and precious stones. And this representation I myself have had an opportunity of seeing” (*The Life of Constantine I*, 28- 30).

11. Socrates — One dream Socrates mentioned was that of Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius had a vision of angels who sang hymns in alternate chants, and so introduced the mode of antiphonal singing (*Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 35 and 36, by Theodoret).

12. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria from 328 to 373 — In his great masterpiece of Christian apology, *Against the Heathen*, he wrote: “Often when the body is quiet, and at rest and asleep, man moves inwardly, and beholds what is outside himself, traveling to other countries, walking about, meeting his acquaintances, and often by these means divining and forecasting the actions of the day. But to what can this be due save to the rational soul, in which man thinks of and perceives things beyond himself?”

“...For if even when united and coupled with the body it is not shut in or commensurate with the small dimensions of the body, but often, when the body lies in bed, not moving, but in death-like sleep, the soul keeps awake by virtue of its own power, and transcends the natural power of the body, and as though traveling away from the body while remaining in it, imagines and beholds things above the earth, and often even holds converse with the saints and angels who are above earthly and bodily existence, and approaches them in the confidence of the purity of its intelligence; shall it not all the more, when separated from the body at the time appointed by God Who coupled them together, have its knowledge of immortality more clear?” (II.31.5 and 33.3)

13. Gregory of Nyssa — In his major philosophical work, *On the Making of Man*, Gregory deals directly with the meaning and place of sleep and dreams in man’s life. He believed that when man is asleep the senses and the reason rest, and the less rational parts of the soul appear to take over. Reason is not, however, extinguished, but smolders like a fire “heaped with chaff” and then breaks forth with insights that modern dream research calls “secondary mentation.”

He went on to say that “while all men are guided by their own minds, there are some few who are deemed worthy of evident Divine communication; so, while the imagination of sleep naturally occurs in a like and equivalent manner for all, some, not all, share by

means of their dreams in some more Divine manifestation....” His reasoning was that there is a natural foreknowledge that comes in an unknown way through the nonrational part of the soul — the “unconscious,” according to modern depth psychology — and it is through this part of the soul that God communicates Himself directly.

Gregory then enumerated the other meanings that dreams can have, offering quite a complete outline of the subject. He suggested that dreams can provide mere reminiscences of daily occupations and events. Or, they can reflect the condition of the body, its hunger or thirst, or the emotional condition of the personality. Dreams can also be understood in medical practice as giving clues to the sickness of the body. Indeed, far from stating a superstitious belief, Gregory laid out quite well the principle upon which today’s analytical study of dreams is based.

Gregory also told, in a sermon entitled “In Praise of the Forty Martyrs,” of a dream that occurred while he was attending a celebration in honor of the soldiers who had been martyred. In the dream, the martyrs challenged Gregory for his Christian lethargy, and it had a profound effect upon his life.

It is clear that philosophically, practically and personally, Gregory of Nyssa believed the dream could be a revelation of depths beyond the human ego.

14. Basil the Great — In his commentary on Isaiah, Basil states, “The enigmas in dreams have a close affinity to those things which are signified in an allegoric or hidden sense in the Scriptures. Thus both Joseph and Daniel, through the gift of prophecy, used to interpret dreams, since the force of reason by itself is not powerful enough for getting at truth” (S. Basilii Magni, *Commentarium in Isaiam Prophetam*, Prooemium 6f., J.-P. Migne, Patrologiae Graecae, Paris, 1880, Vol. 30, Col. 127-30).

That Basil believed in continuing to consider dreams is indicated by the letter he wrote to a woman in which he interpreted the dream she had sent him. He suggested to her that her dream meant she was to spend more time in “spiritual contemplation and cultivating that mental vision by which God is wont to be seen.”

15. Gregory of Nazianzen — In his second book of poems, Gregory writes: “And God summoned me from boyhood in my nocturnal dreams, and I arrived at the very goals of wisdom” (S. Gregorii Theologi, *Carminum*, Liber II, 994-950). In another place he told that this nocturnal vision was the hidden spark that set his whole life aflame for God. In one of his poems, he spoke of the ability of demons to also speak through one’s dreams. “Devote not your trust too much to the mockery of dreams, nor let yourself be terrified by everything; do not become inflated by joyful visions, For frequently a demon prepares these snares for you” (*Carminum*, Liber I, 608-9, lines 209-12).

16. St. John Chrysostom — In his commentary on Acts, volume one, he states, “To some the grace was imparted through dreams, to others it was openly poured forth. For indeed by dreams the prophets saw, and received revelations.” According to Chrysostom, dreams are sent to those whose wills are compliant to God, for they do not need visions

or the more startling divine manifestations, and he mentioned Joseph, the father of Jesus, and Peter and Paul as examples of this truth (*Homilies on Matthew*, IV. 10f., 18; v. 5).

17. Synesius of Cyrene — Synesius wrote an entire book on dreams. He said, “One man learns...while awake, another while asleep. But in the waking state man is the teacher, whereas it is God who makes the dreamer fruitful with His own courage, so that learning and attaining are one and the same. Now to make fruitful is even more than to teach” (Augustine Fitzgerald, *The Essays and Hymns of Synesius of Cyrene*, London, Oxford University Press, 1930, p. 332 [from *Concerning Dreams*]).

Synesius laid out a sound reason for discussing dreams and then enumerated the blessings to be gained from studying them. For the pure soul who receives impressions clearly, a proper study of dreams gives knowledge of the future with all that this implies. Important information is also provided about bodily malfunction and how it can be corrected. Far more important, this undertaking brings the soul to consider immaterial things and so, even though it was begun merely to provide knowledge of the future, it turns the soul to God and develops a love of Him. Synesius also told how dreams had helped him in his writings and in his other endeavors, and how they often gave hope to men who had been oppressed by the difficulties of life.

He made fun of people who relied on the popular dream books, insisting that only by constantly checking dreams with experience could they be understood. Their essential nature is personal, and they must be understood by the dreamer in terms of his own life. Some of them seem to be direct revelations of God, but there are also many dreams that are obscure and difficult to interpret. He suggested that anyone who is serious in studying them should keep a record so that he knows his sleeping life as well as his waking one.

He even saw the connection between mythology and dreams, and explained his belief that the myth is based upon the dream; a true interest in mythology helps a man find the more vital meaning in his own dreams. Finally, Synesius showed the reason for his belief that dreams give hints about eternal life. As the sleeping state is to the waking one, so the life of the soul after death is to the dream life, and thus this state gives some idea of the kind of life that is led by the soul after death.

18. Ambrose — In Ambrose’s famous letter to Theodosius calling for his repentance, he declared that God in a dream forbade him to celebrate communion before the Emperor unless he repented. These are his dramatic words: “I am writing with my own hand that which you alone may read.... I have been warned, not by man, nor through man, but plainly by Himself that this is forbidden me. For when I was anxious, in the very night in which I was preparing to set out, you appeared to me in a dream to have come into the Church, and I was not permitted to offer the sacrifice.... Our God gives warnings in many ways, by heavenly signs, by the precepts of the prophets, by the visions even of sinners He wills that we should understand, that we should entreat Him to take away all disturbances...that the faith and peace of the Church...may continue” (St. Ambrose, Letter LI 14).

Augustine tells how God revealed to St. Ambrose in a dream the hidden location of two martyred saints, who were then retrieved and given a proper consecration (St. Ambrose, Letter XXII; St. Augustine, *The Confessions*, IX [VII] 16; *The City of God*, XXII 8). In St. Ambrose's more theological writings, Ambrose showed that an angel who speaks through a dream is functioning at the direction of the Holy Spirit, since angelic powers are subject to and moved by the Spirit.

19. Augustine — As has already been mentioned in number one of this series, Augustine wrote widely concerning the place and understanding of dreams in the Christian's life. His study of perception was as sophisticated as any in the ancient world. He saw reality as consisting of outer objects to which we react with our bodies, and the impressions of this sense experience, impressions that are "mental" in nature. We then have the inner perception of this sense experience, and finally the mental species in its remembered form. It is the action of the ego that unites these perceptions to the object.

In one place, he calls the faculty of imagination the bridge that mediates the object to consciousness, thus presenting almost the same thinking as that worked out by Synesius of Cyrene. Augustine saw man as possessing an outward eye that receives and mediates sense impressions, and an inward eye that observes and deals with these collected and stored "mental" realities that are called "memory."

In addition to the realities that come from outer perception and from inner perception of "memories," autonomous spiritual realities (angels and demons) can present themselves directly to the inner eye. These are of the same nature as the stored "mental" or psychic realities that are perceived inwardly. Augustine writes that men in sleep or trance can experience contents that come from memory "or some other hidden force through certain spiritual commixtures of a similarly spiritual substance" (St. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, XI. 4.7).

These autonomous realities are nonphysical; yet they can either assume a corporeal appearance and be experienced through the outward eye, or they can be presented directly to the consciousness through the inner eye in dreams, visions and trances. Thus, through dreams, man is presented with a whole storehouse of unconscious memories and spontaneous contents; he is given access to a world that the fathers called "the realm of the spirit."

Just as angels have direct contact with man's psyche and present their messages before the inner eye, so also do demons. "They persuade [men], however, in marvelous and unseen ways, entering by means of that subtlety of their own bodies into the bodies of men who are unaware, and through certain imaginary visions mingling themselves with men's thoughts whether they are awake or asleep" (*The Divination of Demons*, V. 9, N.Y., Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1955, Vol. 27, p. 430).

In addition to presenting a theory of dreams and visions, Augustine also discussed many examples of providential dreams in the course of his writings. One of the most important of them was the famous dream of his mother Monica, in which she saw herself standing

on a measuring device while a young man whose face shone with a smile approached her. She was crying, and when he asked why, she told of her sorrow that her son had turned away from Christ. He told her to look, and suddenly she saw Augustine standing on the same rule with her and she was comforted. Realizing the significance of the symbolism, she was able to go on praying for him with patience and hope; her dreams and visions are also mentioned in several other places in *The Confessions* (*The Confessions*, III. 19; V. 17; VI. 23; VIII. 30).

20. Jerome — In his early life, Jerome was torn between reading the classics and the Bible until he had this dream. “Suddenly I was caught up in the spirit and dragged before the judgment seat of the Judge; and here the light was so bright, and those who stood around were so radiant, that I cast myself upon the ground and did not dare to look up.

“Asked who and what I was I replied: ‘I am a Christian.’ But he who presided said: ‘Thou liest, thou are a follower of Cicero and not of Christ. For “where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also.”’ Instantly I became dumb, and amid the strokes of the lash — for He had ordered me to be scourged — I was tortured more severely still by the fire of conscience, considering with myself that verse, ‘In the grave who shall give thee thanks?’

“Yet for all that I began to cry and to bewail myself, saying: ‘Have mercy upon me, O Lord: have mercy upon me.’ Amid the sound of the scourges this cry still made itself heard. At last the bystanders, falling down before the knees of Him who presided, prayed that He would have pity on my youth, and that He would give me space to repent of my error. He might still, they urged, inflict torture on me, should I ever again read the works of the Gentiles....

“Accordingly I made an oath and called upon His name, saying: ‘Lord, if ever again I possess worldly books, or if ever again I read such, I have denied Thee.’ Dismissed then, on taking this oath, I returned to the upper world, and to the surprise of all, I opened upon them eyes so drenched with tears that my distress served to convince even the incredulous. And that this was no sleep nor idle dreams, such as those by which we are often mocked, I call to witness the tribunal before which I lay, and the terrible judgment which I feared... I profess that my shoulders were black and blue, that I felt the bruises long after I awoke from my sleep, and that thenceforth I read the books of God with a zeal greater than I had previously given to the books of men” (St. Jerome, Letter XXII, *To Ekustochium*, 30).

Jerome’s studies also gave him good reason to value dreams and visions. In commenting on Jeremiah 23:25ff, he shared Jeremiah’s concern, indicating that dreaming is a kind of prophesying that God can use as one vehicle of revelation to a soul. It can be a valuable revelation from God if a man’s life is turned toward Him. But dreams can become idolatrous when they are sought and interpreted for their own sake by one who is serving his own self-interest instead of God. The value of the dream depends upon the person who seeks it and the person who interprets it. Sometimes God sends dreams to the unrighteous, like those of Nebuchadnezzar and Pharaoh, so that the servants of God may

manifest their wisdom. Thus it is the duty of those who have the word of the Lord to explain dreams (S. Eusebii Hieronymi, *Commentariorum in Jeremiam Prophetam*, IV. 23).

This word could not be sought, however, by pagan practices. In commenting on Isaiah 65:4, Jerome went along with the prophet and condemned people who “sit in the graves and the temples of idols where they are accustomed to stretch out on the skins of sacrificial animals in order to know the future by dream, abominations which are still practiced today in the temples of Aescylapius (*Commentariorum in Isaiam Prophetam*). Later, however, in the discussion of Galatians, he brought up specifically the dream in the sixteenth chapter of Acts in which Paul “was given the true light (*lucam vero*)” (*Commentariorum in Epistolam ad Galatos*, 11).

Jerome made no distinction at all between the vision and the dream. He clearly valued them both. Yet in the end, he fixed the ground firmly that would justify a growing fear of these experiences. In translating Leviticus 19:26 and Deuteronomy 18:10 with one word different from other passages, a direct mistranslation, Jerome turned the law: “You shall not practice augury or witchcraft [i.e. soothsaying]” into the prohibition: “You shall not practice augury nor observe dreams.” Thus by the authority of the Vulgate, dreams were classed with soothsaying, and the practice of listening to them with other superstitious ideas.¹

From here we enter the 1000 year period know as the Dark Ages, and little more is said until the writings of Thomas Aquinas.

21. Thomas Aquinas — Aquinas was greatly influenced by Aristotle and sought to reduce Christianity into Aristotle’s worldview. This worldview left no room for direct spiritual encounter. Therefore dreams and visions were played down, along with experiences of angels and demons, healing, tongue-speaking and miracles. In the end, Aquinas’ life contradicted what he had written. He did come into direct relationship with God through a triple dream experience and ceased to write and dictate. When he was urged to go on, he replied: “I can do no more; such things have been revealed to me that all I have written seems as straw, and I now await the end of my life” (*Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 19 [Thomas Aquinas], Chicago, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952, p. vi).

This was the turning point for the Church’s view of dreams and their ability to carry revelation from Almighty God into the believer’s life. Although the Church has flip-flopped back and forth somewhat in its opinion of the value of dreams, the pervading view today is much in line with the rationalism of our day, and very much out of line with the teachings of Scripture and the early Church fathers. One appears strange if he believes that God would actually communicate today to His children through the medium of dreams and visions.

¹ The word *annan* occurs ten times in the Old Testament. In most cases in the current versions, it is simply translated “soothsayer” or “soothsaying.”

22. Abraham Lincoln — Abraham Lincoln dreamed about his impending death just days before his assassination.

There are many more modern examples that could be quoted, but that is not our purpose at this time. There are entire books on the market today giving a Christian philosophical and theological base for interpreting dreams. There also are testimonial books concerning the variety of dreams and visions being experienced in the Church today.

As we have seen over and over again, dreams and visions are considered interchangeable, and so, even though much of this research deals primarily with dreams, it should be viewed in a wider scope to include visions as well.

It is time for the Church to return to a biblical understanding of dreams and visions and revelation.