

## **The Last Greek Father of the Church: The life and thought of Bonaventure Seamus Mulholland OFM**

Bonaventure was born in the town of Bagnoregio some time in 1217, his parents being John and Maria Fidanza. Bonaventure's baptismal name was John and how he got the name of 'Bonaventure' is still unknown, though the most enduring legend is that Francis of Assisi while in Bagnoregio picked up the baby and exclaimed 'Oh! buona ventura' (oh happy coming!). This, I think can definitely be treated as the stuff of legend. Bonaventure entered the Friars Minor probably in 1243 and studied theology at the University of Paris under Alexander of Hales and John de La Rochelle. When Alexander and John died in 1245, Bonaventure continued his theology under Eudes Rigaud and William of Middleton.

In 1248, Bonaventure was a bachelor of theology and he began teaching on the Gospel of Luke. Bonaventure, like all other theology students at the University of Paris, commented on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard between 1250 and 1252. In 1253 he was licensed by the Chancellor of the University of Paris and was regent Master of Theology until 1257. It was during this 'Paris period' that Bonaventure wrote the four sets of the 'Disputed Questions': *On Evangelical Perfection*, *On the Knowledge of Christ* (which is very important for his theory of Divine Illumination); *On the Mystery of the Trinity* (which has one of the best expositions of his proof for the existence of God); and *On Charity and the Last Things*, whole sections of which Thomas Aquinas used.

Bonaventure's admittance to the Masters' Guild in Paris was delayed until October 1257 by what has commonly become known as the 'Mendicant Controversy'. But by that time Bonaventure was no longer teaching because in February 1257 he had been elected Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor and had resigned as Master of Theology so that he could devote his time to the administration of the Franciscan Order. But Paris always had a special place in Bonaventure's heart for, although frequently away on business for Church or Order, he had made it his general headquarters and it was Bonaventure who was largely responsible for the friars being so active in academic pursuits. Bonaventure frequently preached at the University of Paris and engaged with the many theological and philosophical troubles that caused the students and faculty concern.

It was in this period that some of his greatest works were written: the *Breviloquium* (1257) a concise compendium of theology that broke with the traditional method of presenting speculative theology; the *Reduction of the Arts to Theology* (the date of its writing is not known); and the magnificent *Journey of the Mind into God* (1259). In 1260, at the request of the General Chapter, Bonaventure was asked to compose a 'legend' of St Francis. His response was to construct the *Legenda Maior*, or the *Major Life of St Francis*, which, had this been the only thing Bonaventure had ever written, would have ensured his place not just in the history of Christian literature but also in the history of world literature. These wonderful texts are crucial for understanding

the mind-set of Bonaventure, as well as giving us profound insight into his theology and mystical spirituality. But more than this, they show what a brilliant thinker Bonaventure was and while he is known primarily as a spiritual writer, this over-emphasis on one small aspect of Bonaventure's work is a disservice to him. He was one of the most gifted writers of the Medieval Christian world, and while essentially a theologian, he was also one of its keenest, brightest and most perceptive philosophers. This can be seen if works such as the three sets of *Collationes* are carefully studied ('collationes' were informal evening conferences given by a master during the Lenten period to the members and faculty in the friary at Paris). Works such as *On the Ten Commandments* (1267); *On the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (1268); and *On the Six Days of Creation or the Enlightenments of the Church* (1271), (which is commonly known as the 'Collationes in Hexaemeron') reflect Bonaventure's reaction to the Averroistic tendencies that were sweeping through the University of Paris while he was there. In 1273, Bonaventure was made cardinal bishop of Albano (having already turned down the Archbishopric of York) by Gregory X. Bonaventure collaborated with Gregory X on the preparations for the Council of Lyons in 1274, at which Bonaventure played a major role in the reconciliation between Latin and Greek Christians. He died at the Council of Lyons before it closed and was buried there in the presence of the Pope.

Bonaventure was extraordinarily gifted as a writer and as a thinker. He combined the profundity of intellectual insight with the humility of a true son of Francis. A dynamic, creative innovator of vision and idea, in Dante's *Paradiso* and Raphael's *Disputa* he is presented as the equal of Thomas. In the area of medieval mystical theology or spirituality, Bonaventure is without peer. And while not known as a philosopher, his was a rare genius. Central to Bonaventure's theological/spiritual/metaphysical architecture is the Trinity, for which he has a particular love. In his theology/spirituality of the Trinity, the Three Persons are a dynamic community of Love. And at the median point of the Trinity, indeed the mid-point of everything, is the Word.

This theology of the Word forms the keystone to all Bonaventure's work. Christ is the mid-point of the Trinity because as Word he contains all that the Father could possibly 'think', since as Word, he is the Eternal Exemplar (Idea). All that creation is and could possibly be, is already present in the Exemplar that is the Divine Word. What exists outside of God, exists because it existed in the mind of God first in the Exemplar, which while it is the median point of the Trinity, is now also the median point between God and the created order. This creation, like a river, flows from God; it is, says Bonaventure, a 'book' and in books we can read the 'words' of the author. In the realm of the created order we can say that in Bonaventure's theology of creation, creation is the 'book' in which we can read the 'mikro logoi', the 'little words' - those created things which are exemplars of THE Exemplar which is Christ. It is this Word which is also the median point between God and Man, since Jesus is the Word Incarnate: he is human and divine, created and uncreated, infinite and finite. For Bonaventure, creation is a vast canvas on which the Artist (another Bonaventurian metaphor for God Creator) 'paints' his picture which is

all at once, the 'mountains and springs' that 'bless and praise the Lord', as the Psalmist says.

And at the centre of this vast outstretched created and creative canvas is the Word, in whom there is all that is, all that was and all that ever will be. Christ, for Bonaventure, is the centre of the entire created order. This echoes Origen of Alexandria, the Cappadocians, Maximus the Confessor, Gregory Palamas, and would be deepened and enriched by Duns Scotus and his doctrine of the Primacy of Christ, and in modern days, by the powerful insights of Teilhard de Chardin.

For Bonaventure creation was one vast circle, it came from God through the Word (his term is emanation - a flowing out) and it returned to God (Bonaventure uses the term 'reductio'- a leading back). The soul was on an 'itinerarius', a journey. But itineraries can also mean a plan, a map, a road. The itinerarius of the soul was not to God, it was into God (in Deum - 'in' with the accusative = into). The return of the soul to God was not simply to see God 'face-to-face', it was to be taken up into the very life of God himself, it was to be 'enthused' - en-theos - in God. The whole of creation's emanation from God through the Exemplar that was the Divine Word, which reached its apex in Jesus of Nazareth the Word/Exemplar Incarnate, was consummated in the 'leading back' of creation, through that same Word, now resurrected from the dead and constituted as the infinite and eternal Lord of all creation. The journey of emanation and ascent in Bonaventure is the journey of life; the journey of every soul from birth, through to life, through to death through to the life where there is no longer death.

There is much of Bonaventure that simply cannot be written in such a small reflection as this: his theory of the divine illumination of the intellect, his cosmological thought, his anthropology, his eschatology, and his understanding of St Francis. I simply take two key ideas, creation and the Word, to try and give a flavour of Bonaventure's genius both as a thinker and as a writer of unparalleled and incomparable creativity and brilliance. His theology has about it a freshness and a contemporary relevance. He can be utilised for a more profound understanding of the relationship between God and creation; how the transcendent makes itself present in the immanent; the infinite in the finite, etc. Bonaventure's spirituality of contemplative union through mystical reduction allows us to see the heights that the soul may reach aided by grace. His love and reverence for creation as the 'words' of God brought into being through The Divine Word, in whom it exists as exemplars, is a profound theologising of the mystical and poetic insight of St. Francis in the Canticle of Brother Sun.

If one were to assess the orientation of Bonaventure's work, one would have to say that he stands in the long line of the Fathers of the Church. While this is often strictly associated with those thinkers of the post-apostolic era, Bonaventure deserves the title 'Father of the Church' because his work and thought is in the same vein. It is searching, probing, enlightening, elucidating. It is speculative yet grounded in a solid scriptural and doctrinal foundation. And it opens up the mysteries of the unutterable. Yet, a curious feature of his

style of writing is that it seems to owe more to the Eastern writers (who profoundly influenced him) than it does to the Western. And while Bonaventure may have been a Western theologian, his thinking and poetical and profoundly mystical way of writing has a wonderfully attractive Eastern ambience to it. Bonaventure is, all at once, theologian, philosopher and mystic, but he is also a Franciscan: a Franciscan whose profound insights into the Trinity, the Word, the Incarnation, creation and the human condition are as relevant to us today as they were in his own time. In a world assailed by doubts, objections and agnosticism, and thrown into confusion by the power and devastation of nature, Bonaventure's profound insights allow us somehow to touch the hem of God's mantle as it brushes against the edge of the world. And in Bonaventure, God's presence in Jesus is the absolute guarantee that the journey of creation back to that point from which it emanated, the very heart of the Trinity, is a journey begun in love, undertaken in love, and completed in love, through that same Word, which stands in Bonaventure's theology as the very pulse and heartbeat of God himself. Bonaventure is, indeed, the last Greek Father of the Church! **f**

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