

## 10. The Cornerstone

### COLLATION 1

‘In the midst of the Church the Lord will open his mouth and fill him with the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, and clothe him with a robe of glory.’<sup>1</sup> These words from Scripture served as a succinct definition for Bonaventure, setting out to his hearers how he would proceed and what were his goals. He was addressing primarily Christians within the life of the Church, who share a common belief and frame of reference. Bonaventure believed that Christ is the central reference point for all Christian theology, ‘because if that centre is neglected, nothing is obtained’. The goal of Christian belief and theology is to obtain the spirit of wisdom and understanding by holiness of life. This is the vocation of each Christian within the life of the Church and this is the fundamental purpose of Christian theology.

Bonaventure emphasised at all points the close connection between belief and morality, between understanding and virtue. There are three foundations for Christian holiness: willing obedience to the law of God; commitment to peace with others; and dedication to the worship of God. He regarded the Church as an ordered fellowship of friendship, a ‘rational assembly’ bound together by reason and love, harmonious in its diversity but united in its belief. Christian worship rests upon a depth of loving relationships within the Church, and these require a sound moral basis rooted in divine law. Christian obedience is thus the expression of love.

For the individual Christian, life in the Church is supported by illumination of the mind and a consistent ethic. Understanding always calls for obedience, and without this there can be no stable quality of love or relationships, for love and truth stand or fall together. Theology is not an end in itself, therefore, nor just a matter of intellectual curiosity. The Church is a mutually loving fellowship and such love is born from fulfilment of the law of God.

This is the common message of the New Testament and especially of the Gospels: Christ-like love is therefore the hallmark of the Church's common life.<sup>2</sup> True worship is the expression to God of this love: as Bonaventure says, 'the affections of many make a spiritual harmony that is pleasing to the Most High'.<sup>3</sup> Thinking, loving and worshipping are inextricably bound together: they change a person's life and also a community's life in the direction of holiness.

The life of the Church and of humanity is threatened, however, when people turn away from divine law in pursuit of false loves that result in greed and moral corruption. Ill will and cruelty then overturn stable social order, regarding what is evil as actually good. Arrogance and curiosity further undermine the spirit of worship and devotion to God. Many in their pursuit of knowledge depart from the spirit of devotion, as was already apparent to Bonaventure in the life of the universities at that time. Instead, he summoned those committed to a spiritual life within the Church to the path of true Christian wisdom. He pointed out that: 'there has been an attack on the life of Christ in morals by the theologians, and an attack on the doctrine of Christ by the false positions of the philosophers in the teaching of the arts'.<sup>4</sup> The secular theologians repeatedly challenged the authenticity of the Franciscan and Dominican way of life as mendicants. Philosophy derived from the writings of Aristotle and his commentators, recently discovered and translated, was being advanced by some in the University of Paris and elsewhere as the basis for an autonomous intellectual discipline. This potentially challenged the ultimate authority of Christian theology, which is based on the revelation of divine truth as contained in the Bible and embodied in the person of Jesus Christ who is the Word of God, and who said: 'No one knows the Son but the Father, and no one knows the Father but the Son, and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.'<sup>5</sup>

With this text Bonaventure began to expound the centrality of Christ as the mediator between God and humanity,<sup>6</sup> holding together everything as its true and hidden centre: 'Hence it is necessary to begin from Christ if anyone wishes to reach Christian wisdom.'<sup>7</sup> He is also 'the beginning', as intimated by Moses, 'the initiator of divine wisdom', at the beginning of Genesis, and also by the Evangelist in the prologue of John's gospel. For Bonaventure the fourth Gospel was the culmination of divine wisdom revealed in Christ. Christ is therefore the key to

understanding how everything is made, and this was confirmed by the testimony of Paul in his letter to the Colossians, where he asserted that in Christ all the riches of divine wisdom and knowledge lie hidden.<sup>8</sup>

With great boldness and a certain urgency, Bonaventure proceeded to show how the whole panoply of human learning as taught in the universities at that time actually had its anchorage in Christ the Word of God.<sup>9</sup> These Bonaventure listed as concerned with essence, nature, distance, teaching, moderation, justice and concord, the interests respectively of the metaphysician, physicist, mathematician, logician, ethicist, jurist and theologian.

He began with metaphysics which is where he believed that all serious learning in the university and the Church should begin and not end. The metaphysician is concerned with essence or the nature of being, and the study of this should always come first because of its root in the eternal being of God. Being exists either of itself or it is derived from another. All created being is derived from the eternal being of God, who is the sole cause of His own existence. God's being is also expressed in His Son, the Word who is revealed in Christ; and God's self-revelation as Father and Son is completed in the manifestation of the Holy Spirit: 'These three persons are equal and equally noble because it is of equal nobility for the Holy Spirit to complete <sup>[10]</sup> the divine persons, as it is for the Father to originate them, or for the Son to represent them all.'<sup>11</sup> Although a philosopher might be able to intuit a possible distinction within God of a beginning, middle and end of created existence by inference from created realities, such a person cannot discover the Trinity as such. A search for the ultimate cause of being, and consideration of the goal of life in terms of well-being, leaves unaddressed and unresolved the question of what is the exemplar or expression of the divine purpose, which holds the beginning and end together and so gives meaning to all that exists.

Bonaventure's teaching expounded the significance of the last words of the prologue to John's gospel, which may be translated as: 'no one has seen God at any time: God the only-begotten, the Son in the bosom of the Father, he has expressed Him'.<sup>12</sup> He says that:

the Father from eternity begot a Son similar to Himself, and thus he declared both Himself and a likeness similar to

Himself that is endowed with his entire power. He declared what He can do and wishes to do, expressing everything in the Son as the very centre of His Art.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, Christ the centre of the cosmos is also the centre of the human person, teaching inwardly divine truth and enabling any certain human understanding of and response to truth at all. This is a fundamental axiom of Bonaventure's Christology for, in words of the psalmist that he often cited, 'it is in Thy light that we see light'.<sup>14</sup> The Son, therefore, stands at the heart of the Trinity as its supreme expression to humanity and within the created world.

Bonaventure used the opening words of Genesis about the creation of light to confound those who were alleging that the world was created eternally because it springs from the eternal mind of God. This conviction sprang from certain Islamic commentaries on the philosophy of Aristotle, whose discovery and translation in the universities of the thirteenth century was causing the first great upheaval in western European thought. Bonaventure recognised its force as an argument, however, saying: 'because our minds were born in the eternal light, they posit that since things are produced or written in the eternal Art from eternity, so all things were created in the world from eternity'.<sup>15</sup> This is a fallacy of human thought however. Bonaventure asserted instead the Johannine teaching that: 'the Word expresses the Father in the things that were created by Him, thus leading us to the Father and so bringing all things together into unity'.<sup>16</sup> The Word of God is symbolised by the tree of life in the Garden of Eden, being also the life-giving spring enabling human beings to return to God the Father. It is the Word alone that endows human beings with eternal life. This contrasts with the tree of knowledge of good and evil, accessible by curiosity and experiment, but by which the devil and Adam fell. For the result of a false love of the created world is spiritual death 'when someone falls in love with created beauty'. Blindness then ensues towards the created world as primarily the mirror of God's glory. Bonaventure believed that the philosophers and scientists in the universities were in danger of this trap.

Bonaventure's conclusion is expressed in these famous words:

through the first Truth [i.e. Christ the Word] all must return: as Jesus said, 'I came forth from the Father and have

come into the world: and again, I leave the world and I go to the Father.<sup>[17]</sup> So let a person say, 'Lord, I came from you Most High; I come to you Most High, and through you Most High.' This is the centre of metaphysics that leads us back [to God]; and this is the whole of our metaphysics: emanation, exemplarity, and consummation, which means to be illumined by spiritual rays of [divine] light and thus to be led back to the Most High.<sup>18</sup>

The nature of God as Father is to express Himself completely in the Son, and also through him in the creation of the world. The purpose of God the Trinity is to pour the Holy Spirit into the lives of human beings in order to lead them back willingly and lovingly to their origin in God. The coming of Christ as the incarnate redeemer is the historical and spiritual turning point of this movement of divine love and engagement with human beings, who are made in the divine image and likeness in order to be able to love God freely and forever, by perceiving His glory in Scripture, in the created world, and supremely in Christ.

Of Jesus it was said by John the Baptist that 'in your midst there stands one whom you do not know'.<sup>19</sup> Bonaventure proceeded to demonstrate how the deep root and meaning of all organised human learning is in fact found only in the central mystery of Christ. This was a bold claim, reflecting his own conviction and experience as a teacher and Christian theologian. It was also an expression of his determination to thwart the relative secularisation of learning that he perceived was underway in the universities. He began by defending the physicist in the proper study of nature, its properties and energies, showing also how humanity may be perceived as a microcosm of the whole. Thus, for example, the centrality of the sun mirrors the centrality of the human heart. Christ by his incarnation is revealed as the hidden centre of all physical reality, as the Word made flesh. Christ is also the Head of the Body, the Church, which comprises human beings who are willingly being remade in his image and likeness into an organic whole: for 'he diffuses the Holy Spirit into the members of the Church united to him'.<sup>20</sup> The implication is clear: no study of the natural world can overturn belief in the significance of the Incarnation. Instead, belief in the Incarnation gives meaning and form to all that exists and is crucial to all true perception of reality.

The same principle was applied by Bonaventure to mathematics, where distance is measured from a centre, most notably in astronomy in a medieval world view where the earth was the central vantage point even if the sun was supreme. The crucifixion of Christ occurred on the earth, in the lowest and least of places.<sup>21</sup> 'So the Son of God, low, poor and modest, by assuming our earth and being made of earth, came not only to its surface but into the very depths of its centre' by his descent into hell.<sup>22</sup> To withdraw from Christ is thus to abandon the humility which alone mediates salvation, because humility is the truth about human existence, and salvation only comes through 'the humility of the Cross'.

'What is the advantage of being able to measure things when one does not know how to measure oneself?' Bonaventure's challenge was clear, both intellectually and morally: there is no point in accumulating scientific knowledge if it is not matched by spiritual truth; and to value it as an end in itself is to risk distorting created reality and humanity within it. Bonaventure's perception here was as acute as it has proved to be prophetic. He asked: 'how is it that humility is not possessed nor the light of wisdom?' It is because of the human desire for self-aggrandisement and over-confidence, by which Christians and others dismiss or ignore the central truth of the Cross. 'But wonderful was divine wisdom, which worked salvation through the ashes of humility' – a striking image. For hidden at the heart of the circle of the world's existence stands the Cross, where two diameter lines intersect, holding everything together.<sup>23</sup>

It may surprise the modern reader that Bonaventure established coherent and intellectual argument upon the mystery of the Resurrection, and his argumentation is not immediately clear without some prior grasp of medieval logic. Just as the centre draws together two propositions and resolves them, so Christ overcame the false argument of evil, which seduced humanity in the beginning and continues to do so. For human beings are generally led into sin by a desire for something good, held out to them by the deception of evil. To become 'like God' is indeed the destiny of human beings, but how is this to occur? Not through sinful disobedience, by which suffering, want and death became the common lot of humanity. To remedy this catastrophic plight, Christ came into the world, assuming these very traits of human suffering and existence in order to make human beings truly like God. Through his compassion, Christ brought to bear upon abject human need

the healing strength of divine nature, power and immortality. He came in order to remedy the dereliction brought about by sin at the behest of evil, and by his death to destroy the power of death over all humanity. In Paul's words in his letter to Philippians: 'he did not cling to equality with God, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant . . . he humbled himself, becoming obedient even to death on the Cross: therefore God highly exalted him.'<sup>24</sup>

The eternal purpose of God, the major proposition of the argument, expressed itself in the mystery of the Cross, its minor proposition by which Christ willingly assumed suffering and death. Their resolution was the resurrection of Christ, who appeared repeatedly to his disciples for a significant period after his death. He appeared in their midst and brought them divine peace. By entering through closed doors, he revealed his divine power, and, by showing them his tangible wounds, he elicited their faith, most notably that of Thomas who acclaimed him as 'my Lord and my God!'<sup>25</sup> The book sealed with seven seals in Revelation<sup>26</sup> is therefore a symbol of the sevenfold centrality of Christ in his resurrection. The opening of this book relates to Christ's emergence from the tomb, discarding his grave-clothes in the act of revealing the hidden purpose of God. Thus, an important apocalyptic mystery only made sense in the light of the resurrection of Christ, and this was a direct challenge and corrective to some of his Franciscan hearers. To become 'like God' is, therefore, to follow closely the way of Christ, even to the point of crucifixion, and this is the meaning of the Franciscan way. In this manner the false wisdom of the world is confounded in each generation by the folly of the Cross.<sup>27</sup> All genuine Christian thought, language and argument rests upon the truth of this principle and is tested by it: the Cross is the key to divine wisdom that unlocks truth and reality.

'Faith is like the morning star in the midst of a cloud.'<sup>28</sup> Christian morality as moderation rests upon the mystery of the ascension of Christ, for 'a Christian must ascend from virtue to virtue'.<sup>29</sup> Christian discipleship means growth and development, while repentance means change of heart and mind.<sup>30</sup> There can be no limit to virtue, here or hereafter, but its foundation is always faith or trust in God. By being plunged into the waters of baptism, the Christian way passes through the darkness of faith in order to glimpse the light of Christ shining in that darkness. As Bonaventure says, 'this is the foundation through which Christ may be poured into us'.<sup>31</sup> Like Moses, a Christian

is also called to ascend the mountain of the Lord from its base, which is Christian morality, through arduous purgation, and by moving up towards spiritual illumination upon the summit of the mountain.<sup>32</sup> Bonaventure took as his text these famous words from the book of Wisdom:

Like a fine mist Wisdom rises from the power of God, a clear effluence from the glory of the Almighty. . . . Wisdom is the radiance that streams from everlasting light, the flawless mirror of the active power of God and the image of His goodness . . . spanning the world in power from end to end, and gently ordering all things.<sup>33</sup>

For Bonaventure, the pursuit of divine wisdom was always the highest goal of human life and endeavour, and all Christian morality and spirituality tends towards this end. The ascended Christ calls, and those who love him must follow him upwards. His ascension constitutes their ladder of divine ascent, being the means whereby they receive the Holy Spirit and so become like him by following in his footsteps. As in the words of the Latin creed called *Quicumque Vult*: 'He is one Christ, not by conversion of divinity into flesh, but by taking humanity into God.'

With regard to justice, 'Christ will be central in the final judgement', as his teaching in the Gospels makes clear.<sup>34</sup> All humanity will be measured by his humanity, and all compassion by his compassion. Those who are cruel and evil will be exposed and condemned for their failure to love by which they destroy themselves. Bonaventure condemned those who asserted the eternity of the world and the distribution of a single agent intelligence through all human beings, as this made a mockery of personal moral accountability and rendered belief in divine judgement void. The justice of God revealed in Christ will in the end perfect the world, however. Discussing the famous opening vision of the prophet Ezekiel of the divine glory, Bonaventure reclaimed its meaning for orthodox Christianity from any apocalyptic speculation.<sup>35</sup> In a rather compressed exegesis, each detail became a symbol of the final judgement over which Christ will preside in his two natures, when there will be a final separation of the pure from the impure.<sup>36</sup> Christians are therefore called to take this seriously and 'before judgement to prepare justice [or righteousness] for yourselves'.<sup>37</sup>



Divine judgement is the prelude to final peace or concord with God, achieved by the reconciling work of Christ. This is the goal of the divine purpose in creation, redemption and sanctification: 'It compels the theologian to consider how the world created by God may be led back to God.' This is why the work of divine reconciliation at the Cross stands at the centre of Christian theology. Because Christ is the true centre, a Christian theologian has to understand how souls are saved through faith, to grow in virtue until they are consummated and perfected in heaven. The authority for this vision is found in Revelation where the Lamb of God will be in the midst of his people as their true shepherd, leading them to the fountains of the waters of life.<sup>38</sup> The seven golden lampstands in that book represent the seven branches of learning that Bonaventure has just discussed, with Christ the Word of God in their midst as the principle of human intelligibility. The rest of the *Collations on the Hexaëmeron* examines the implications of these spiritual and intellectual 'illuminations' for the life of the Christian within the Church. In so doing, Bonaventure advanced a complete theory of knowledge and truth by which Christ is perceived as the key to all thought about reality, spiritual, human and created; for, in the words of the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.'<sup>39</sup>