

1. Introduction

St Bonaventure was born around the year 1217 in Bagnoregio, which is near Orvieto in Italy. He was educated at the University of Paris, where he also taught alongside his friend, Thomas Aquinas, for some years until 1257 when he was made Minister General of the Franciscans. This engaged him in a relentless labour of teaching and preaching, travelling on foot across the length and breadth of Europe to supervise the growing Franciscan movement. His commitment to this vocation prevented him from accepting the post of Archbishop of York in 1265, but in 1273 he was commanded by Pope Gregory X to become a cardinal and bishop. Bonaventure joined the Pope at the second Council of Lyons, where he died on 15 July 1274.

As the leader of the Franciscans during a difficult period in their history, Bonaventure was regarded by many as virtually the second founder of the movement. Certainly, all that he taught and wrote was intended to put the memory and legacy of Francis of Assisi on a firm biblical and doctrinal footing. Bonaventure was also concerned to raise the standards of learning and preaching among the Franciscans, in order to advance the mission of the Gospel and also to protect the growing movement from criticism. He brought all his expertise and experience as an academic teacher of theology in Paris to bear upon the formation and nurture of those now in his pastoral care.

Bonaventure was unusual in that his mind was both sharply analytical and eloquently poetic in its expression. He also had a formidable memory, especially of Scripture, and there is nothing that he teaches that is not rooted in the Bible. He distilled the wisdom of many who had gone before him, both his immediate mentors in Paris, and the great teachers of the Western Church, beginning with Augustine, whose theology was the paramount influence on Bonaventure's own. Many rich strands of teaching

flow like tributaries into Bonaventure's thought, notably that of Gregory the Great, Anselm, Bernard of Clairvaux and the Victorine theologians; also, the writings of Dionysius, recently translated afresh into Latin, which exercised a distinctive influence on how Bonaventure structured his thought. To some extent, therefore, he was conveying the wealth of this spiritual tradition to his Franciscan hearers; but, at the same time, he was transposing and transforming it, as the detailed references in the Latin edition of his writings, and also in the new English translations, make clear. Bonaventure was in every way a brilliant communicator and this is most evident in the many sermons that he composed and circulated as models for use in Franciscan preaching and ministry, and also in his masterly and extensive *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*.

Bonaventure is the most consistently Christ-centred of theologians, and the spiritual goal of Christian theology is never out of his sight. He did not regard the study of theology as an end in itself, let alone a simply academic exercise; nor did he consider it on a par with philosophy. He believed instead what Irenaeus had actually declared many centuries before him: that 'the vision of God is the life of man, and the glory of God is the living man'. Christian theology is concerned with the redemption and transformation of human nature by the Spirit of Christ, who became man so that human beings might become divine in him. Bonaventure is rightly regarded as a supreme mystical theologian, in the sense that he believed and taught that experience of the transforming love of Christ is at the heart of all Christian thought and prayer. This love constrains a person, as it did in the case of Francis, to the point of their participating spiritually in the redeeming suffering of the crucified Christ. Then the glory of God descends to transfigure a person, deifying him or her, and revealing that the soul is indeed made in the image and likeness of God and has a profound affinity with Him. Bonaventure believed strongly that human beings are called to become by grace partakers of the divine nature in union with Christ.

Bonaventure took to heart and taught assiduously that, in the words of Augustine at the beginning of his *Confessions*, 'God has made us for Himself, and our hearts are empty and restless until they find their rest in Him.' The loving call of Christ is to enable a willing return to God and this is the meaning of Christian life, thought and prayer; for Bonaventure, love always transcended

learning. It is the work of reason to come to understand Christ, who is the truth, by faith as well as by thought, and so to come to perceive more deeply what is revealed by divine revelation in the Bible and mediated through the sacraments of the Church. Bonaventure had a very positive expectation of what could be accomplished by the Holy Spirit in human nature. He himself embodied the truth that he taught, being very well loved as an outstanding Christian in his own lifetime and thereafter.

This book provides a comprehensive conspectus of how Bonaventure taught Christian theology and applied it to the spiritual life. It is intended to be a guide through his many writings, though not as a substitute for reading them. It begins with what Bonaventure thought about Francis of Assisi. The opening chapter examines the official *Life of St Francis* that Bonaventure was commissioned to write – the *Legenda Maior*, which was probably completed in 1261. He also composed a shorter version for liturgical use called the *Legenda Minor*. These ‘Lives’ coloured forever the way in which Francis was remembered, perceived and portrayed in the Western Church. The *Life of St Francis* is a work of careful theological interpretation of the significance of the common memory of the saint, and it is rare to have a hagiography written by someone who himself was a saint and theologian. It has to be placed, however, within the context of the challenges confronting the Franciscans about what it meant to embrace the poverty of Christ. Consideration of Bonaventure’s *Life of St Francis* is therefore prefaced by his teaching about the meaning of poverty, contained in a treatise that he composed in 1256 called *Disputed Questions on Evangelical Perfection*.

The controversy over poverty did not go away, either in the universities or within the Franciscan Order itself. Some of Bonaventure’s work as Minister General was reconciling conflicting interpretations of what Francis meant, and determining how a life of evangelical poverty could actually be led with integrity within a fast-growing international institution. The chapter entitled ‘Poverty’ examines Bonaventure’s response and teaching as it emerges in various letters of spiritual direction, and also in the formal treatise that he published in 1268 called *Defence of the Mendicants*.

The next two chapters examine in some detail Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium* – ‘The Soul’s Journey into God’. This is rightly regarded as a classic spiritual work, which has had great influence

through many centuries. Composed during a retreat at La Verna near Arezzo in 1259, where Francis had received the stigmata thirty-three years before, this book is the key to understanding the thought of Bonaventure and his deep association with, and fidelity to, the spiritual experience and witness of Francis. It is by any standards a masterpiece of thought and writing, designed as Bonaventure indicates for careful reflection.

The two chapters entitled 'Life in Christ' engage directly with Bonaventure's explicitly spiritual writings. *The Threefold Way* is a classic exposition of the life of prayer. The treatise *On the Perfection of Life* was written in 1259 for some Poor Clares in France and is an exposition of the meaning of humility. *On Governing the Soul* is an epitome of Bonaventure's spiritual teaching, probably composed for Blanche, Queen of Spain. The *Soliloquium* is a rich and fascinating compilation, a veritable *Philokalia* of Western monastic theology and spiritual teaching, probably composed in 1259 or 1260 as Bonaventure's life changed. It shows how Bonaventure used his sources and made them available to his students. *The Tree of Life* is one of his most famous and influential works, often portrayed artistically in association with Bonaventure: it is a profound reflection on the humanity and humility of Jesus. *The Mystical Vine* is a comparable reflection about the meaning of the passion and crucifixion of Christ. Bonaventure composed the little treatise called *Five Feasts of the Child Jesus* towards the end of his life. It is a sensitive reflection on the meaning of spiritual motherhood, bringing forth Christ in the soul, and linking private spiritual life with the liturgical feasts of the Church.

The chapter entitled 'The Word of God' considers the two other biblical commentaries still remaining from Bonaventure's hand in addition to his masterpiece on Luke's gospel: his commentaries on Ecclesiastes and on John's gospel, both written before 1256. They were intended primarily for a university audience and they arose from the formal way in which Bonaventure taught and dealt with questions arising in that context. The commentary on Ecclesiastes is concerned with true values in Christian moral and spiritual life. The commentary on John's gospel demonstrates the depths of Bonaventure's understanding of Christology. For him, this Gospel is the master-key to all the Gospels and indeed to the whole of Scripture, as it reveals the glory of the incarnate Christ. Bonaventure's commentary is also striking for the number of hard questions about the meaning of the Gospel that he addressed.

The chapter entitled 'Faith and Understanding' discerns the rich strand of spiritual teaching evident in Bonaventure's more strictly academic treatises. For him, as for Anselm, *fides quaerens intellectum* – 'faith seeks understanding': this was the governing principle of his whole approach to theology. Towards the end of his life, Bonaventure tried to distil this approach in a treatise called *The Reduction of the Arts to Theology*. The word 'reduction' simply means the leading back of all learning to theology and the knowledge of God, which is its goal. This is one of the most significant intellectual works that Bonaventure wrote. In 1256 he composed a detailed examination called *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity*. In this, Bonaventure set out the reasons for Christian belief and the nature of that belief, indicating the fundamental importance of belief in the Trinity for all Christian theology and prayer. A little earlier, in 1254, he composed a similar treatise called *Disputed Questions on the Knowledge of Christ*. This rather technical discussion revolved around the exact nature of Christ's knowledge as a human being in union with God. Its value as spiritual theology is the way in which it illuminates the depths of the Incarnation, and also the significance of ecstatic knowledge within the love of God. Finally, in a fine sermon preached before the University of Paris, perhaps at his formal inauguration there as a doctor, Bonaventure set forth the centrality of Christ as 'the way, the truth and the life', the master-key to all knowledge, learning and understanding: for, as he says, 'Christ is the master of contemplative knowledge.'

Bonaventure's famous summation of Christian theology, called the *Breviloquium*, is the subject of the next three chapters. This masterpiece was much shorter than the great *Summa Theologica* of his contemporary Thomas Aquinas. Written in 1257, it marked the end of Bonaventure's formal role as a doctor in the University of Paris. It was intended to distil his experience of teaching the young, and to enable them to approach the Bible with confidence as the foundation of Christian theology. Bonaventure carefully and clearly set forth the great doctrines of Christianity, explaining why Christian belief is what it is. The contemplative ethos of the *Breviloquium* is striking, being rich in spiritual theology in its teaching about the work of the Holy Spirit.

Bonaventure always gave great attention to the Holy Spirit in all his writings and the next two chapters examine in some detail a brilliant set of addresses or 'collations' that Bonaventure gave in

Paris during Lent in 1268 about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. They have a major focus on the meaning of the Annunciation, which fell in the course of that season, revealing Bonaventure's profound devotion to the Virgin Mary. They begin with a mature exposition of the primacy of divine grace in Christian belief and spiritual experience. They then examine the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit as found at the beginning of Isaiah 11. This enabled Bonaventure to knit together his whole understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in the light of the Incarnation. The last chapter considers the relevance of Bonaventure's theology for the life of the Church today, and it includes the judgements of two great Catholic scholars of the twentieth century, Etienne Gilson and Hans Urs von Balthasar, about Bonaventure's stature and significance. Like Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure was a saint as well as a systematic theologian, and both are Doctors of the Catholic Church.

This book therefore provides a bridge into the thought of Bonaventure, and also a comprehensive handbook of Christian theology in its bearing upon the spiritual life. It enables his distinctive spiritual theology to be seen as a whole, as well as making his writings, in Latin or English, accessible and attractive. Bonaventure wrote with clarity and conviction, and his authority arose from his profound grasp of Scripture and patristic monastic tradition. He was a great pastor and preacher, and also a very effective teacher. The force behind how he wrote sprang from his keen sense of the significance of Francis and Clare and all that flowed from them, not least into his own spiritual life and experience as a person of deep contemplative and mystical prayer.

Bonaventure's holiness made a lasting impression on all who knew or met him. The crucial question when approaching his theology is, 'how is it true?' What is striking is the way in which the Christology of Bonaventure enables a complete engagement with truth and reality as human beings experience it in themselves as well as among each other. Its radical clarity compels attention and speaks directly to the Church today.