

4. Divine Indwelling

The *Breviloquium*, a 'Summa' of Christian Theology

In the *Breviloquium* Bonaventure distilled the teaching that he gave in his *Commentary on the Sentences* and elsewhere for the benefit of his Franciscan students. It is therefore a less intimate text than the *Itinerarium* and its value is the way in which he anchors belief in deification firmly within the classical structure of Christian thought and belief. For many of his hearers, the Bible was sometimes daunting and opaque, while Christian theology could often seem to be incoherent or remote. They needed confidence in their understanding of both in order to teach accurately and to preach effectively. Bonaventure was also concerned that they should enter more deeply into the spiritual reality of Christian life. He began his work by citing a favourite text from the letter to the Ephesians, reiterating the prayer there that his hearers might 'be strengthened through the Spirit with power in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith'.¹ For the goal of Christian life is to come to know 'the surpassing love of Christ' and 'to be filled with all the fullness of God'.²

For Bonaventure, Christian theology provides access to the healing love of God. He believed that God is not only the creator but also the restorer and perfecter of human nature. Christian theology must deal directly with sin and its consequences in order to point to Christ the Healer, who came into the world to rescue fallen humanity. Spiritual theology must treat of the healing and well-being of the soul by pointing the way to the ultimate destiny of human existence, which is the vision of the glory of

1. See D.V. Monti (tr.), *Works of St Bonaventure, Volume IX: Breviloquium* (St Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1994).

2. Ephesians 3:14-19.

God. Bonaventure desired that all Christians should experience or 'taste' this spiritual reality for themselves and become 'afame with longing to acquire it'.³

Divine indwelling is the goal of the Christian life, in fulfilment of the promise of Jesus that '*we* will come to a person and make our abode there'.⁴ Bonaventure used the Latin word *habitare* to describe such indwelling as 'a spiritual reality which when accepted enables divine grace to make us pleasing to God and so *deiform*: it leads us to God and enables God to possess us, and to be possessed by us, and so to dwell within us'.⁵ This is an important and practical definition by Bonaventure of the meaning of deiformity or deification. He went on to affirm that divine indwelling entails the indwelling of the Trinity itself. To become deiform, or deified, is to be led by the Holy Spirit into the loving embrace of God as He comes to us in Jesus Christ. It is to possess and be possessed by love, for divine indwelling is essentially a loving and personal relationship with Christ in the Holy Spirit.

In the *Breviloquium*, Bonaventure outlined the classical Christian understanding of the nature of the human soul as something real and 'endowed with existence, life, intelligence, and freedom of choice'. It is created *ex nihilo* along with the formation of the physical body by God, and its life and purpose are eternal. Its inherent intelligence enables it to grasp created realities with the mind, and also to receive 'the "creating essence"[6] of God in whose image it was made according to memory, understanding, and will' by the Word of God. This means that the human soul has an innate capacity for God – *capax Dei*. Its essential freedom of choice is manifest in the joint operation of reason and will.⁷ In this definition, Bonaventure summarised the teaching of Augustine,

3. *Breviloquium* I.i.2-3.

4. John 14:23.

5. *Breviloquium* I.v.2: *habitare* namque dicit effectum spiritualem, cum acceptatione, sicut est effectus gratiae gratum facientis, quae est *deiformis*, et in Deum *reducit*, et Deum facit nos habere, et haberi a nobis, ac per hoc et inhabitare in nobis. Cf. Revelation 3.20.

6. This phrase comes from St Anselm's *Monologion* 13 and was derived from Augustine's *City of God* XII.26. In those contexts, as here also, it relates to the creative action and being of the Word of God, and not to the inner hidden essence or being of God, which is unknowable: cf. John 1:18.

7. *Breviloquium* II.ix.1.

Anselm and Bernard of Clairvaux. His critical assertion is that the human soul is equipped to be able to respond to the immediacy of God's presence within it, and this is its present and also its eternal destiny.

How can this be? The inherent and deliberate congruence between the soul and the body is the key, which implies that the body has an important role in response to divine indwelling within the soul. In the light of the incarnation of Christ, body and soul together are to be transformed by him, as Paul teaches in his letter to the Philippians: 'he will fashion anew the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory'.⁸ Bonaventure believed that this was the significance of the experience of Francis when he received the stigmata at La Verna: Christ crucified dwelt within him and shone out through him. Human flesh can therefore become God-bearing and transparent to the indwelling of Christ, as the body becomes the sanctuary of the indwelling Holy Spirit.⁹

'Divine wisdom is manifest inasmuch as God made the body proportionate in its own way to the soul. It is united to the soul as its perfecting principle, so that it might move forward and attain blessedness.'¹⁰ The intricate beauty of the body and the fact that human beings stand upright are both highly significant. For in the beginning, human beings were created 'good, innocent, and upright'. This is their true mode of existence. What is now experienced sadly is the deformity of human nature, which Christ came into the world to heal, as he demonstrated in the gospels. His call to fallen human beings is to move from deformity to *deiformity* – to become made like him.

No less significant is the inner spiritual and moral life of a human being. God gives to each person the capacity to judge what is right and wrong, by conscience and 'synderesis', which warn a person and act like a compass, directing to what is good. Bonaventure used the word synderesis to signify the innate 'weight' of the soul that gravitates towards the goodness of God, an inherent tendency responding rather like magnetic or gravitational attraction, unless otherwise deliberately impeded or distracted. God also endows human beings with a measure of

8. Philippians 3:21.

9. I Corinthians 6:19.

10. *Breviloquium* II.x.4.

His grace, to know themselves, to understand the world around them and to come to know God Himself. The hallmark of human nature is therefore the capacity to love freely, 'so that they might love God above all things, and their neighbour as themselves'.¹¹ Herein lies the crucial human affinity to God Himself expressed in the capacity willingly to love. Only disobedience can wreck this, as it did in the beginning of human history, and continues to do so. Only willing obedience can be the foundation for a free and loving relationship with God, as expressed in the words of the Virgin Mary, 'may it be to me according to your word'.¹² Here 'word' implies relationship, dialogue and understanding; it also implies trust. Christian obedience to the will of God is never just blind submission, for as Jesus said to his disciples, 'I have called you friends'.¹³

Bonaventure had a very positive estimate of human nature and its spiritual potential, and this is evident throughout his writings. His temperament was humane, sensitive and generous. The divine calling to deiformity or deification was the basis of his whole theory of knowledge. He saw the created world as a gradated mirror of God its Creator. Within this world there are human beings, who are capable of reflecting and responding to the truth and glory of God that is manifest everywhere in creation. Their vocation is to grow in their likeness to God Himself by becoming deiform. As Bonaventure outlined in the *Itinerarium*, by the growth of perception and by diligent obedience, human beings are enabled to ascend gradually to God as the supreme principle of all that exists. For ultimately deification is a divine gift and 'every just and holy spirit possesses the Holy Spirit as an infused gift'.¹⁴ The fundamental sign that this is so is 'the threefold dowry of faith, hope and love'. Deification therefore means a growing likeness to God, here and hereafter.

With Hugh of St Victor, Bonaventure believed that human beings are endowed with a threefold mental capacity: the 'eye of the flesh' to see the world around them; the 'eye of reason' to discern the inner life of the soul; and the 'eye of contemplation

11. Ibid., II.xi.6.

12. Luke 1:38.

13. John 15:15.

14. *Breviloquium* II.xii.1-2.

to see God, and those things that are in God'.¹⁵ As Jesus himself promised: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.'¹⁶ Although sin has clouded the 'eye of contemplation', its capacity may be restored 'through grace, faith, and understanding of the Scriptures. For it is by these means that the human soul is cleansed, enlightened, and perfected for contemplation of heavenly realities.'¹⁷

Human beings fall short of the glory of God,¹⁸ however, and what now passes for human nature is in fact too often a distortion and stunting of it. 'Human beings can no longer imitate divine virtue, know its light, or love its goodness.' God stooped down in Christ as the Word made flesh 'so that He might be known, loved, and imitated by human beings, who are themselves made flesh'. In the words of earlier Church Fathers, 'God became man so that man might become divine.' Bonaventure concluded that 'in this way, by knowing, loving, and imitating God, humanity might be cured of the disease of sin'.¹⁹ This is why the Incarnation is the key to human salvation, and also why in Christianity deformity is in fact Christlikeness.

The focal point of Christlikeness is expressed in the humility and self-offering of the Mother of the Lord.²⁰ Bonaventure affirmed that:

the Blessed Virgin Mary became a mother in the most complete sense, for without the assistance of a man she conceived the Son of God by the working of the Holy Spirit. Because the love of the Holy Spirit burned within her soul in such a singular way, the power of the Holy Spirit did marvellous things in her flesh, by means of grace prompting her and assisting her, thus elevating her nature, as was demanded for that wonderful conception to be able to take place within her.²¹

15. Ibid., II.xii.4-5.

16. Matthew 5:8.

17. *Breviloquium* II.xii.5.

18. Romans 3:23.

19. *Breviloquium* IV.i.3.

20. Luke 1:38.

21. *Breviloquium* IV.iii.5.

She became the 'Theotokos', the Bearer of God the Son, the 'Mother of God', and she epitomises the mystery and promise of deification.

It is in the fifth part of the *Breviloquium* that the heart of Bonaventure's understanding of deification or deiformity is fully revealed. He first explained the meaning of divine grace that makes a person pleasing to God.²² Divine grace is mediated by the Holy Spirit, as 'the uncreated Gift'. By this gift, a person's soul 'is perfected and becomes a bride of Christ, a daughter of the eternal Father, and a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit'. Bonaventure's use here and elsewhere of feminine language is highly significant and striking. 'Divine grace is a gift that purifies, illumines, and perfects the soul. It gives life as it reforms and strengthens it; and, as it elevates it, likens it to God, joining it to Him, making the soul acceptable to God.'²³ This is a crucial definition and sheds light on how Bonaventure understood the work of the Holy Spirit. He did not think that God communicated his essential being, however, 'but rather an influence that emanates from God'.²⁴ In this emphasis, his thought is very close to that of St Gregory Palamas in the next century, who asserted the crucial distinction between the 'essence' and the 'energies' of God. Bonaventure believed that God may truly be apprehended but never fully comprehended because of the finitude of the human mind and experience, and also the infinite nature of divine Being.

Becoming deiform does not pluck a person from his or her earthly existence, however, but instead it nurtures a complete transformation of human life.²⁵ This is Bonaventure's formal definition in the *Breviloquium* of what he understood by deiformity or deification:

To become worthy of eternal blessedness, a rational human spirit has to come to participate in this God-forming influence. For the divine influence that creates a deiform soul comes from God, conforms us to God, and leads us back to God as to our goal. It restores the image of our mind to a true likeness of the blessed Trinity, by reordering

22. *Gratia gratum faciens*.

23. *Breviloquium* Vi.2.

24. *Ibid.*, Vi.3.

25. *Habitus deiformus*.

our choices, and instilling true rest and delight in God. Possessed of these qualities, the human soul is thus led back to the immediate presence of God and becomes conformed directly to Him. For divine grace is immediate in its impact, flowing as it does directly from God Himself. The innate human image of God that sprang from Him is now matched by the likeness of God Himself, which is in fact the same image now conformed to God in all its perfection. This is why it may be called the image of a new creation.²⁶

The divine image restored in a human being is in fact the image of Christ, who is the true Image of God and in whose image a person is made.²⁷ Deiformity means possessing the life of God Himself, 'for the one who enjoys God possesses God: and along with the grace that conforms someone to the enjoyment of God, there is also bestowed the uncreated Gift of the Holy Spirit, so that whoever possesses the Spirit possesses God's own Self'.²⁸ Such is the nature of the love of God that each person has a unique relationship and friendship with Him, which Bonaventure described by the analogy of love as experienced within a close marriage, or in adoption as a child of God. Only divine grace can accomplish this, however, rendering the human soul into 'a temple of God, a bride of Christ, and a daughter of the eternal Father'.²⁹ The union with Christ that mediates the indwelling of the Trinity is closer and more intimate, however, than any human relationship, even within a loving marriage, friendship or family.

This is no passive experience however, as engagement with God entails a free and vigorous response of fervent love. 'The strength of virtue cleanses, strengthens, and elevates the soul. The splendour of truth enlightens and reforms it by conforming it to God. The fervour of love perfects it and gives it life by uniting it to God.' Within the microcosm of the human soul is fulfilled the eternal divine purpose that 'the work of God should return to God in the manner of an intelligible circle', as each created being is restored and fulfilled in Him.³⁰ For Bonaventure believed

26. Ibid., V.i.3; cf. II Corinthians 5:17.

27. Colossians 1:15; and Hebrews 1:3.

28. *Breviloquium* V.i.4.

29. Ibid., V.i.5.

30. Ibid., V.i.6.

that ‘in the original state of human innocence, when the divine image was not yet spoiled but was God-like by grace, the “book of creation” was sufficient to enable human beings to perceive the light of divine Wisdom’ and to rejoice in the glory of God.³¹ Now, alas, original sin casts its baneful shadow like a cataract over the eye of contemplation, starving the soul of its true vision of God. A sign of deification is therefore a renewed capacity to sense and understand the presence and nature of God shining through the created world.

In this fifth part of the *Breviloquium*, therefore, Bonaventure set out in great detail the way in which divine grace interacts with a person, who is being drawn into the orbit of the love of God, and the moral and spiritual response required.³² The goal of this spiritual journey is the peace that comes when ‘divine wisdom unites us to the highest truth and goodness, in which all the desires of our souls find their purpose and their rest’.³³ This is not simply an intellectual perception, however, but rather the ravishment of divine love, a delight that is ‘tasted and enjoyed by a holy soul’. As Bonaventure said elsewhere, ‘contemplatives truly *feel* more than they know’.³⁴

Such a person becomes fit for contemplation, which is the mutual gaze and embrace of the Bride and the Bridegroom that is experienced by the spiritual senses. Then the sublime beauty of Christ the Bridegroom is seen as divine Splendour.^[35] As the Word of God, he is heard as true Harmony; and as the Wisdom of God, he is tasted as supremely sweet, for he is both Word and Splendour. As he is breathed into our hearts, we sense the most wonderful fragrance of his presence within us.^[36] As the Incarnate Word, he is to be cherished with true delight, as someone who actually dwells among us in his Body,^[37] and gives himself to us to be touched,^[38] kissed, and embraced through a most fiery love. This enables our

31. Ibid., II.xii.4.

32. See Dales, *Way Back to God*, pp. 135-41.

33. *Breviloquium* V.vi.5.

34. *Commentary on St John's Gospel* 1.43; see Karris, *Gospel of John*, p. 91.

35. Hebrews 1:3.

36. Song of Songs 1:1-3.

37. John 1:14.

38. I John 1:1.