

Introduction

Deification has become an important focus and unity in Christian theology, Eastern and Western, and much common ground has emerged in the light of recent research, not least into the theology of St Thomas Aquinas and St Gregory Palamas. Close examination of the writings of St Bonaventure reveals that it is an important and uniting theme throughout his teaching, beginning with his magisterial *Commentary on the Sentences* that distils how he taught theology in the University of Paris. What is striking, however, is the way in which he was able to convey the meaning of deification, or deiformity, to a variety of audiences throughout his ministry, first as a teaching theologian, and then as Minister General of the Franciscans. In so doing he demonstrated his great mastery of the Bible, as all that he said was rooted precisely in Scripture.

For Bonaventure deification was not just a speculative dimension to belief, but rather an immediate spiritual reality and the vocation for any Christian. The memory of St Francis receiving the stigmata at La Verna in 1224 coloured how Bonaventure thought about this and it gave to his teaching its clarity and urgency. For him, deification, or deiformity as he generally called it, was not just a matter of theory but of praxis. How could a person become deified by the Holy Spirit, and what might this mean in practical terms, as well as in terms of a transformed spiritual understanding and vision of Christ crucified?

The fact that teaching about deification is evident in his *Commentary on St Luke's Gospel* and then, towards the end of his life, in his *Collations on the Hexaëmeron* demonstrates how fundamental this was to Bonaventure's whole approach to teaching Christian theology and the practice of prayer. This study is intended as a complement to the studies that I have already published of these

two important and brilliant texts, and they are not discussed again here.

This book begins in chapter one with consideration of the New Testament texts that support belief in the divine promise of deification, and how Bonaventure addressed some of these in his *Commentary on St John's Gospel*. In the second chapter, his formal teaching about deification in his *Commentary on the Sentences* is closely examined as Bonaventure approached it in a very original and perceptive way. The third chapter examines how the teaching of St Augustine about the human capacity to receive divine life in Christ is fundamental to Bonaventure's brilliant *Itinerarium* or the *Journey of the Mind into God*. He composed this while on retreat at La Verna where he was strongly influenced by the memory of St Francis. In the fourth chapter, Bonaventure was concerned to make the essence of Christian belief readily available to his students and others in his *Breviloquium*. It is a succinct *Summa Theologiae*. It includes important teaching about deification and the way in which this is mediated within the sacramental life of the Church.

As Minister General, Bonaventure often returned to Paris, and in 1268 he delivered a course of lectures there during Lent about the Holy Spirit. It is striking that the Holy Spirit played a prominent role in the spiritual experience and teaching of St Francis and St Clare, and Bonaventure expressed his own strong belief in the active work of the Holy Spirit in Christian life throughout all his writings. The fifth chapter considers the first part of these lectures, and the sixth chapter considers his teaching in the second part about the significance of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Bonaventure always showed a deep and sensitive devotion to her, and these lectures were delivered on the Feast of the Annunciation.

In the seventh chapter, the Christ-centred character of Bonaventure's theology is considered in relation to a famous sermon that he preached in the University of Paris, and also to one of his most popular and influential writings – *The Tree of Life*. Bonaventure was a gifted spiritual guide and in the eighth chapter this is apparent in a series of his spiritual writings for various audiences, which had a profound influence at the time and long after. The ninth chapter reveals Bonaventure as a leading churchman, providing teaching and practical guidance to Franciscan and other clergy, as well as to members of the

aristocracy in Spain and France, who were sympathetic to the Franciscan mission.

The tenth and last chapter considers closely Bonaventure's profound *Life of St Francis*, the *Legenda Maior* which exerted such an influence on subsequent Catholic theology and art. This is a rich and minutely composed text, which collated the remaining memories of the saint and placed them within a carefully balanced framework of spiritual theology. Bonaventure portrayed Francis as an exemplar of Christian life for all, but also as someone for whom deification meant *cruciformity* – conformity to Christ crucified. This spiritual transformation within the life and experience of Francis came to its climax in the mystery of the stigmata. This miracle was carefully described by Bonaventure in a vivid and authoritative way. The chapter concludes with homage to St Clare as the living link between the time of St Francis and that of Bonaventure, and as someone whose hidden life and teaching embodied and safeguarded the original vision and charism of the saint.