

FRIARS MINOR IN THE WORLD AND IN THE CHURCH



In Company with Saint Bonaventure of Bagnoregio

The eighth centenary of the birth of St. Bonaventure is celebrated this year. Bonaventure, a central figure in the Franciscan Family, was born around 1217 in *Bagnoregio*, close to Orvieto (Italy). He joined the Order in 1245, having already graduated with an Arts degree. In doing so he was influenced by Alexander of Hales who, because of his attraction to Franciscan spirituality, had previously made the transition from the world of academics to that of the cloister. Bonaventure was a Master of Theology in Paris in 1255; in 1257 he was elected Minister General; and the year 1272 saw him as Cardinal Bishop of Albano with responsibility for the preparation of the Council of Lyon, during which he died on July 15th, 1274. His complete works, the *Opera Omnia*, were published in 9 volumes between 1882 and 1902 by the friars of Quaracchi.

For Bonaventure, the human person is a being with deep desires. These desires involve both intelligence and affection seeking out and enjoying the beauty of all things — being drawn towards others because of a desire for harmony¹. At the same time, Bonaventure sees this desiring person as someone who accepts the demands of the journey because of an intuition that what lies ahead has meaning. The human person knows that underlying the many and various ways by which the world is manifested, there is a unique and constant presence from which everything comes and to which everything returns. For Bonaventure, Jesus Christ represents the center point of the potential union of all things (*Christocentrism*), because in him everything has its origins and its fulfillment. In Christ, human desire also finds the path to the answers it seeks and longs for.

This desire for a consciousness of the union of God and the world (and of living within it) is seen by Bonaventure as being expressed in three major areas of his life as a Christian:

1. In the ascetical and mystical experience of seeking the face of God revealed in the humanity of Christ;
 2. Through cultural dialogue with people of his time, bringing faith and reason into unity;
- And finally,
3. In his commitment to the Order of Friars Minor: strengthening it and maintaining it in fidelity to Francis and in service to the Church.

1. Bonaventure was above all a “man of God” who became a “spiritual guide” to men and women. His many spiritual writings of both ascetical² and devotional³ character attest to this. In the former, he attempts to describe a process by which we progressively approach God in our particular time and place, while in the devotional writing his goal is to arouse our love for God, directing our affections towards the life of Christ and contemplating his humanity. In these, as in all his writings, the Seraphic Doctor is deeply rooted in the Word of God, which nourished him through his assiduous reading and meditation on the Scriptures.

Among the many worthy points he makes, one is particularly emphasized: in the spiritual life, love of God cannot be reduced to pure emotionalism and affective instincts. It needs models and well thought-out processes that dispose the soul to wonder. Without an ordered ascetical process, the human soul will find it difficult to find the necessary quiet

and tranquility that allows it to hear, see, taste, smell, and touch the mystery of God. For Bonaventure, it is not a question of “conquering” God, but of “allowing oneself to be found” — by being open to the unimaginable surprise of an encounter with God.

Bonaventure also reminds us, as Religious, of a second important element: in the past and in the present the world has always needed “*spiritual masters*” — men and women who through the witness of their life are able to help others in the process of journeying towards an experience of God. However, this proposal of providing “*spiritual formation*” must be founded in real, deep personal experiences, thus giving a truly Franciscan flavor to the spiritual journey. Yes, the world needs contemplatives, but they must be able to proclaim the joy of the Gospel and the beauty of living the Franciscan charism in fraternity. Our spiritual tradition, built up through holy places and extraordinary examples of holiness and learning, has a richness that today’s world recognizes as being genuinely effective in the attainment of true spiritual growth.

2. Bonaventure was also a university professor. He experienced the desire for God as a source of wonder and spiritual love, and he expressed this through a passionate dialogue with the culture of his time⁴. His teaching is undergirded by a twofold truth: the human person has been created in order to arrive at Divine Wisdom, to taste the wisdom of God — but it is only by means of intelligence, and through the truths of wisdom, that this can happen. In the context of university life in the mid-thirteenth century, there was an obligation to tackle the difficult questions of reconciling philosophy and theology, reason and faith, intelligence and affection, knowledge and love⁵. There was a danger that two intellectual positions would be held in parallel, with the serious risk of settling for a binary truth — one philosophical and the other theological, each a stranger to the other, or each conflicting with the other. Bonaventure’s solution depends on two core ideas: the human person is on a journey towards the One, the True, and the Good (expressions of the Trinitarian mystery resplendent in all things); at the same time, each person is accompanied on this path by Christ who is truth itself, and who is the inner doctor, enlightening everyone in the world.

So Bonaventure does not excommunicate the new philosophical ideas associated with Aristotle; instead he tries to integrate them into the concept of a single and progressive path that the mind, moved by the desires of the heart and supported by intelligence, travels toward God. A fundamental principle, of which Bonaventure reminds his contemporaries, is the following: intelligence is the way to wisdom,

but if it closes in on itself, it inevitably falls into error.

Bonaventure offers two basic strategies to Franciscans who live in the 21st century — in a world dominated by scientific and technological knowledge that is hugely powerful, expansive, and seemingly indifferent to the *Other* and the *Beyond*. First, he asks us to take on an attitude of dialogue that is real and engaged, having a positive outlook and great respect for human capabilities, recognizing that they are a sure manifestation of the beauty that God has given to creation and to the human person. Bonaventure's vision is not compatible with any attitude that would shun or oppose the world with its scientific and technological skills, or that would reject knowledge and development. The mystery of God as One and Triune is present in all of reality; everything bears the mark of God's presence, and within the human person is the ability to discover this meaning and to proclaim its beauty.

At the same time, with regard to this world, he also invites us to develop a sense of openness to the transcendent, reminding people of today of two important and encouraging truths. First, every thought process leads the human person towards a deeper truth; towards that truth which unites scattered fragments and directs us to a fullness and fulfillment that goes beyond the intellectual, and that requires love. To deliberately close ourselves to the infinite would condemn the human person to science and technology that is soulless and lacking in hope. In addition, the Trinitarian mystery of divine love is what brings life to all of our efforts to approach the One, the True, and the Good. With faith giving us certainty, we should proclaim that the redemptive mystery of Christ is at work in every effort to bring about a better and more humane world, and that Christ gives himself without reserve to every person at all times.⁶

3. Finally, Bonaventure was given responsibility for the Order, being elected Minister General in 1257, and remaining in office until his death (1274). This shows the great esteem in which he was held by the friars. They considered him to be an irreplaceable gift to the life of the Order during a period of extraordinarily rapid expansion⁷.

First of all, he wanted to help the friars to connect to Francis at the level of ideals, so as to more faithfully live out their Religious calling. What he intended was to restate the ideals that Francis of Assisi had left as an inheritance in a way that would lead to them being a source of spiritual growth and communion, rather than of conflict and disorder. Poverty, humility, loyalty to daily commitments, the life of prayer and fraternity, and a simple and mod-

est style of life, all made up a summons to an Order that was at risk of going astray because of the prestige and power that the friars had acquired within the Church and society. In this sense, it was hugely important for Bonaventure to rewrite the life of Francis: without this model of beauty in which the mystical love of God shines through, and without a generous commitment to the world in communion with the "Poor Christ", the friars would have found it difficult to live an authentic life of minority.

In addition to nurturing a good quality of life within the Franciscan family, he was also concerned with making the friars ready to serve the intellectual and pastoral needs of Christianity by organizing and supporting rigorous courses of study. This was a continuation of the decisions taken by Francis in response to the demand for reform proclaimed in 1215 at the fourth Lateran Council. Bonaventure felt the urgency of calling on the friars to be at the service of the universal Church and of providing them with the necessary intellectual and pastoral formation, but without giving them either reason to boast or to compete with the local church. If they could only remain free from rivalry and the desire for power, the friars could then communicate enlightenment and good. They could respond to the demands of the times and of the Gospel in a manner that would be humble, but also competent.

Bonaventure, therefore, invites us to make a choice with regard to two major issues. First of all, he exhorts us to nurture and protect our relationship with the ideal of Gospel life uniquely represented by Francis. This allows us to be friars who are open to the needs of this world, and capable of communicating a message characterized by simplicity, joy and minority, fraternity and prophecy. In addition to this, our presence within the Church must have theologically informed intelligence, good pastoral formation, and strong commitment to the apostolate at its heart. In short, he reminds us that to be salt and light for the earth — with a distinctive "Franciscan" flavor — we need to be heralds who are credible not only because of our way of life, but also because of our "competence" in presenting the saving Word.⁸

If we still want to be friars of the people, men who bring good news to the streets of our world, Bonaventure reminds us that our Franciscan life has three essential elements: a consistent and credible relationship with the mystery of God's love; fraternal life that is characterized by peace, and is a sign of reconciled humanity; and finally, a serious intellectual formation that enables us to effectively and competently enter into dialogue with our world. What is of concern here is not the matter of reestablishing a great Order, but perhaps instead of accepting our current numerical and institutional

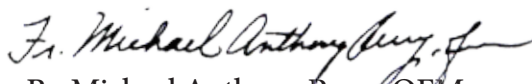
poverty with humility. Edified by a renewed focus on Francis, we might then return to being truly and simply “*friars minor*”. It is from that point that we must begin again to journey with passion, intelligence, and generosity. We will seek to make the good news of the Gospel that was proclaimed by Francis and restated by Bonaventure, ring out — touching the mind and heart of our contemporary world, a world that thirsts for hope and still longs to look *Beyond* to encounter the *Other*.

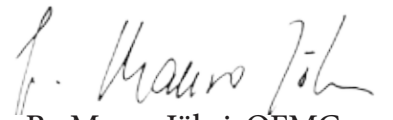
CONCLUSION

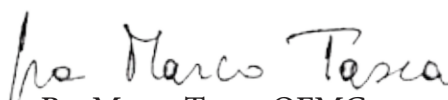
In his writings, Bonaventure uses the circle to describe the motion that occurs between God and the human person. Rather than a vertical relationship, he speaks of a circular movement whose dynamic is the convergent mutual seeking of both God and the human person — two pilgrims bound by the same desire for communion. The person who sets out on this path is met by the solicitude of the One who made himself a pilgrim in order to meet people wherever they are. The ultimate act of the intellectual and affective journey will not be “to apprehend” in the sense of domination, but to be understood. Indeed, it means to be embraced by Him who, out of love alone, dwells among us, allowing us to meet Him in all our efforts towards unity, truth, and goodness. This is the urgent and penetrating message that Bonaventure invites us to assimilate and pass on to others, a sign of our presence at this difficult time of rapid change. Saint Bonaventure helps us to “spread the wings” of the hope that drives us to be like him, unceasing seekers of God, singing of the beauty of creation and witnessing to a Love and Beauty that “moves all things.”

- 1 “In fact, the soul is not contemplative without a lively desire. Therefore, desire disposes the soul to receive the light.” (*Collationes in Hexaëmeron* 22, 29).
- 2 We can recall some of his principal writings: *The Threefold Way*; *The Soliloquium*; *On the Perfection of Life Addressed to the Sisters*; *On Governing the Soul*; *The Treatise of Preparation for Mass*.
- 3 *The Tree of Life*; *The Five Feasts of Child Jesus*; *The Office of Passion*; *The Mystical Vine*.
- 4 In addition to his monumental *Commentary on the Judgments*, we will mention only a few of his theological writings: *Retracing the Arts to Theology*; *The Soul’s Journey into God*; *The Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit*; *The Collationes in Hexaëmeron*.
- 5 “My first invitation, then, is to the groaning of prayer through the crucified Christ that the reader may not believe that it suffices to have reading without unction, speculation without devotion, investigation without admiration, observation without exultation, diligence without compassion, industry without piety, knowledge without love, understanding without humility, study without divine grace, the mirror without divinely inspired wisdom.” (*Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, prologue, 4).
- 6 “The Franciscan saint [Bonaventure] teaches us that each creature bears in itself a specifically Trinitarian structure, so real that it could be readily contemplated if only the human gaze were not so partial, dark and fragile. In this way, he points out to us the challenge of trying to read reality in a Trinitarian key.” (*Laudato Si*, 239).
- 7 *The Constitutions of Narbonne*; *The Legenda Major and the Legenda Minor (Lives of St. Francis)*; *The Apologia of the Poor*.
- 8 “The study of the wise consists of this: that our study be directed only to God, who is completely to be desired.” (*Collationes in Hexaëmeron* 19, 27).

THE GENERAL MINISTERS OF THE FIRST ORDER AND OF THE TOR


Br. Michael Anthony Perry, OFM


Br. Mauro Jöhri, OFMCapp


Br. Marco Tasca, OFMConv


Br. Nicholas Polichnowski, TOR

Rome, 14 July 2017
Vigil of the Feast of St. Bonaventure