

EARTH & ALTAR

READING BONAVENTURE IN A TIME OF CRISIS

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*Traditional image of St. Bonaventure.
Photo courtesy of author*

If you travel to Florence – and everyone should see Florence if the time and money can be found – chances that the first great sight you will see after you arrive is the church of Santa Maria Novella. It is a sprawling Renaissance Gothic complex, blending humanist ideas of proportion with medieval exuberance. Frescos are on nearly every wall. The artists involved are a who’s-who of the Florentine Renaissance: Lippi, Giotto, Brunelleschi, Ghirlandaio. It is a triumph of what we used to call Western Civilization, and in the Spanish chapel you will find the most triumphalist bit of all: a series of four frescos illustrating the triumph of the Dominican order over heresy. In pride of place is *The Triumph of St Thomas Aquinas*, and shows him plump and satisfied, holding a copy of the *Summa Theologica*.

What could better capture the dominant position that Thomas Aquinas holds in how we understand the medieval church and its theology? Secondary school students learn – and argue with – his Five Ways for proving the existence of God. US Supreme Court justices such as Antonin Scalia and Neil Gorsuch have been shaped in their reasoning by his account of natural law. Even in the Church of England – obsessed, as it is, with the contemporary – ordinands are still likely to encounter him in training.

Now, I am a great fan of Thomas, but he is not always a comfort in a time of crisis. For better or for worse, Aquinas was an Aristotelian and understood humanity in terms of its natural and supernatural goals. Thomas’ vision is majestic – everything in human life has its purpose, and the ultimate purpose is to know God – but it is also monochrome. Thomas really has very little time for the difference between individual humans, apart from relying on Aristotle to explain why the sexes are different. But we live in a time of crisis: our understanding of what makes us human has received a battering through most of us being locked down. Our historical misuse of the categories of race, gender, class and ability still has ramifications today – if we didn’t know it already, ‘Black Lives Matter’ has taught us that the injustices of the past still structure how we live now.

We should, I think, be reading more of St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1217-1274). Born in the small town of Bagnoregio, in central Italy, Bonaventure embraced the university and the mendicant lives, the theological and the spiritual. He was trained at the University of Paris, where he was a contemporary of Aquinas. There he became a Franciscan. He writes of being attracted to the Franciscan life through its simplicity and resemblance to the early church: “As the Church began with simple fishermen and afterwards developed to include renowned and skilled doctors, so you will see it be the case in the order of Blessed Francis. In this way God shows that it was not founded by the prudence of men, but by Christ.” (1)

But Bonaventure was no simple friar. Trained in the scriptures as well as scholasticism, he produced both biblical commentaries and scholastic disputations. After being elected Minister-General of the Franciscans in 1257, he produced his great spiritual writings, most famously *The Soul’s Journey into God*.

Unlike Thomas Aquinas, with his big, universal ideas of human nature and its goal, Bonaventure has a great love of the particular. At the start of *The Soul's Journey into God*, he recounts his experience while meditating on Mount La Verna, immediately after being elected Minister General, at around the 33rd anniversary of St Francis of Assisi's death. He tells us how there came to mind Francis' vision of "a winged Seraph in the form of the Crucified." This taught the road to the rapture which Francis reached: the six levels of illumination symbolized by the seraph's six wings.

Bonaventure's six stages of illumination in *The Soul's Journey* work from the ground up; from creatures to God's own nature. We begin with God's vestiges in the visible universe. In this we investigate the different parts of the material universe, and in their origin, magnitude, multitude, beauty, fullness and activity, we find God reflected, as though through a mirror (c.f. 1 Corinthians 13.12). Differences in creatures are vital here. For instance, Bonaventure distinguishes how some things exist, others exist and live, and others exist, live and discern. This is implicitly a reference to the Trinity – Bonaventure finds threefold patterns in all aspects of creation – but it is also a reflection of the hierarchy of Being, of which God is the ultimate source. It suggests that everything has value, no matter its way of existing, precisely *because* it exists, and therefore reflects God.

The Soul's Journey moves on: we also encounter God through his vestiges in the world of our senses. The way we encounter beauty and proportion in the world around us and make judgements on it reflects God, who is true delight, and sets the eternal laws for all creation. Likewise, at the third stages of contemplation we approach God through his image stamped on our natural powers in the way our intellect works, and how we divide our knowledge we get through it into different fields of study.

The fourth stage of illumination takes us from knowing God through nature and the human mind to revelation: here, we contemplate God in his image in us as it has been restored by grace. When we receive Christ through faith, the image of God within us is restored, and we can know God as he truly is as Father, Son and Spirit. Finally, in the fifth and sixth stages of illumination, we come to true knowledge and contemplate the divine being itself through its primary name, which is 'Being,' and as Trinity.

Having carried us through these exalted heights of contemplation, though, Bonaventure brings us back to where we started: the creation. Once we know that God is 'Being itself' then everything which exists, including human beings, exists in God. Bonaventure says God's being is all-inclusive: "It is, therefore, all-inclusive, not as the essence of all things, but as the supremely excellent and most universal and most sufficient cause of all essences, whose power is supremely infinite and multiple in its efficacy because it is supremely unified in its essence." (2) The fact that God is supremely one is the cause of the diversity of creation, and the greater that diversity, the more spectacularly it reflects the oneness of God. In speaking God as Trinity, Bonaventure says that "the highest good must be most self-diffusive." In other words, God in his own being is diffusive as Father begets the Son and breaths forth the Spirit, and the Trinity's own goodness diffuses through the whole of creation's diversity.

You may be thinking at this point, "Well, that's great way of meditating on the divine being. But what's it got to say to us now?" Unlike Aquinas, with his picture of humanity as being a single nature with defined goals, Bonaventure thinks of all creatures as complex and diverse for their own sake. This has striking resonances with the issues of our day. In his commentary on the 6 days of creation (the Hexaemeron), he reminds us that all vegetation was created 'each according to its own kind', and it is beautiful for this diversity. Bonaventure sees beauty in what humans see as malformed – briars and thorn bushes are beautiful without regard to their usefulness to us. He refers to the bride in Song of Songs 1.5 for further evidence of this, commenting, "*Nigra sum, sed formosa; quia nigra, ideo formosa,*" (3) or "'I am black, but beautiful'; that is [she] is beautiful because she is black."

Bonaventure offers us, in a few short words, an ecology and an approach to race and culture very different from the patterns of thinking we have inherited in the West. We have tended to define our approach to the natural world in terms of its usefulness to us, not its inherent beauty-in-diversity.

Approaches to ecology that speak of ‘sustainability’ are still premised around continued human consumption as the reason for conservation. In the same way inclusion of different races and cultures has often been based on assimilation. In the past and today, people of colour or from non-Anglo-American cultures are sometimes valued only when they act in ways which correspond to white European norms. Song of Songs 1.5, which Bonaventure quotes, is not immune from these problems. It has been used to denigrate black bodies and also to romanticize or exoticize darker skin. The history of the cult of the Black Madonna witnesses to these tensions, as does the behaviour of some congregations when the subject of race appears (as anyone who has sung ‘Mary blessed teenage mother’ in a mostly white, middle-class congregation can testify!).

In response Bonaventure tells us: “Beautiful because black.” Bonaventure turns conventional thinking on its head: what is different enhances our understanding of the Trinity’s activity in the creation. ‘Black’ is not a problematic category to be explained, accommodated, or included. Instead, it is beautiful in its own right and for its own sake, as a vestige of the Triune God. The same could be said for all human bodies, cultures and ways of life. Where they are not rejoiced in, the image of God is defaced – a sign of the sin Bonaventure sees as distorting our understanding of the creation, which can only be overcome by the Saviour’s cross.

For those of us in the Christian church committed to creedal orthodoxy and to recovering the theological treasures of the past, Bonaventure offers us something for the time of crisis in which we live. He was a product of his time; you will find no charter in his texts for the liberation of women or gay people. But you will find a commitment to scripture and the tradition, and from them you will be drawn to a view of the creation that takes us towards valuing what is different, specific and diverse for its own sake. Bonaventure would have no time for those who say, “All Lives Matter.” He would have been concerned for the details: lives matter because every creature in its diversity reflects the overflowing goodness of the Triune God. Where lives are not seen as beautiful for their own sake, something is missing. But as all creatures in their diversity point us to the Triune God, so all these things will be restored in the Crucified.

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1. *Epistola de tribus quaestionibus*, 13, quoted in Ewert Cousins, “Introduction” in *Bonaventure: The Soul’s Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St Francis*, ed. and trans. Ewert Cousins (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1978), 6.
 2. *Itinerarium* 5.7 in *Bonaventure: The Soul’s Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St Francis*, ed. and trans. Ewert Cousins (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1978), 98-100.
 3. *Hexaemeron* 14.4. Translation provided by: http://john114.org/Docs/SB_Hex_Page.htm



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