

## St. Bonaventure, St. Francis and the *Bonum*

The idea of God as *Bonum* is fundamental to Franciscan spirituality. The way in which St. Francis related to God as 'Good' shaped his outlook on the world. This mystical experience of Francis was later interpreted theologically by St. Bonaventure. Therefore, it is possible to retrace aspects of Bonaventure's treatment of *Bonum* to their roots in the charism of Francis. I shall begin by focusing on chapters five and six of Bonaventure's *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* which deal with the Divine names – Being and Good. These two chapters will be examined and compared regarding their functions and approaches. Then, the idea of the *Summum Bonum* in chapter six will be shown to relate back to Francis' concept of God as *Bonum*.

Bonaventure, in the *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, presents us with two ways of contemplating God. In chapter five, we are led to do this by meditating on 'Being' as the name of God. 'Being' leads us to contemplate the oneness of God. God is 'Being Itself'; uncreated, existing of Itself, from Whom all else that is derives existence. Therefore, 'Being Itself' must be first, eternal and most simple. This is how the first way of contemplation focuses on what Bonaventure calls the 'essential attributes' of God (ch. 5, 1).<sup>1</sup>

The second way of contemplation, found mostly in chapter six, focuses on God as *Bonum* which leads us to conceptualise God as Trinity. Bonaventure demonstrates that three Persons are necessary in a Godhead which is Supreme Goodness and so we consider ...'the properties of the persons' (ch. 5, 1). Since goodness is self-diffusive, the God Who is Good must be supremely self-communicative.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we contemplate the procession of Persons from the Father Who is the productive Origin and then, the dynamic, eternal overflow of goodness between these Persons. This relational concept of God contrasts with the previous chapter's emphasis on God as One. Chapter six goes on to contemplate Jesus Christ. He appears in this chapter since He cannot be understood as the Divine Word Incarnate without foreknowledge of the Trinity. Conversely, we would have no knowledge of the Trinity without Jesus, Who revealed it to us. The revelation of Jesus is itself a result of God's goodness.

Chapters five and six are similar in their structures. An exposition of the name of God, 'Being' or 'Good' is followed by contemplation of opposing pairs of attributes belonging to 'Being' or 'Good'. Their parallel structures raise this question: why does Bonaventure give us two ways of contemplating God's likeness instead of just one? A possible reason is connected with Bonaventure's use of the Platonic technique of *reductio*. Reduction in the structure of the *Itinerarium*<sup>3</sup> makes the journey a regression by numerical stages from the multiple parts of Creation to their Origin, the One, Who is God (ch. 7, 5). Chapters one and two lead us to God through the multiple *vestigia Dei* in the Universe and then in the countless sense perceptions of these *vestigia*.

In chapters three and four, we consider the *imago Dei* through the three powers of the human soul: memory, intellect and will and in the work of the three theological virtues: faith, hope and love. Continuing the pattern of reduction, before arriving at union with the 'One' in chapter seven, we are led through a meditation based on 'two'. This is presented, in chapters five and six, as the two ways of contemplating God, symbolised by two cherubs facing the Ark of God. Each chapter then focuses on pairs of attributes of God. In chapter seven, there is no more contemplation of God because the one who contemplates can no longer be separated from God. In this way, two have become one. The focus of each stage of the ascent can be seen as moving up inside the next level; being encompassed by it. Creation (chapters one and two) is encompassed by the human person (chapters three and four) in two ways: as it passes into the intellect through the senses and as the human person is a microcosm of creation (ch. 2, 2). The human person and creation originate and subsist in the Being and Goodness of God (chapters five and six). These are essential divine attributes of the one God, with Whom the soul is united in chapter seven. Bonaventure represents this inward movement of the soul metaphorically in the temple of Jerusalem, entering ever more interior levels: the outer court, the holy place, the holy of holies (ch. 5, 1). The reduction may be visualised as follows:

chapters 1 and 2:     **MULTIPLE** vestiges in the Universe

chapters 3 and 4:     **3-FOLD** images/powers in the human soul

chapters 5 and 6:     **2-WAY** likenesses of God: Being and Good, **2** cherubs, **PAIRS** of opposites

chapter 7: union with **THE ONE**

Of the two contemplative approaches to God, *Bonum* in chapter six occupies the more important position. Chapter six represents, 'the high point of our illuminations' (ch. 6, 7). In chapter one (ch. 1, 1) we were told that the enjoyment of the *Summum Bonum* would be the goal of the whole journey. The sixth chapter symbolises the sixth day of creation in Genesis on which God's work was completed with the creation of man and woman. This is why the chapter contemplates the wonder of humanity and its summit, Jesus Christ. Meditation on 'Being' as the name of God leads on to 'Good', as shown in the historical sequence of their revelation. Bonaventure tells us that the name, 'I am' is revealed in the Old Testament (Exodus 3:14) and 'Good', revealed in the New Testament (Luke 18:19).

As chapter five leads to chapter six so both chapters five and six prepare us for the final stage of rest in God in chapter seven. This last step is the work of God, not of human effort. We can only dispose ourselves for union by desiring it totally and by surrendering our whole being to God so that we may die to ourselves and this world together with Christ crucified. In order for this to happen, Bonaventure tells us, we must let go of the limitations of our reason so that God can lead us, ...! "to that which is supremely unknown, to the light beyond lights."<sup>14</sup> Bonaventure prepares us

for this surrender by inviting us to contemplate attributes of God which are logically incompatible. He begins this preparation from the start of chapter five (ch. 5, 2) when he writes that ...'Being itself ...is the first name of God' and ...'the Good ....is the first name of God.' Our reason would tell us that two different names for God could not both be 'the first'. Bonaventure then presents us with pairs of attributes of God which contradict each other. Cousins (1978) argues that the 'coincidence of opposites' is the key to understanding Bonaventure's entire theological vision and that chapters five to seven of the *Itinerarium* are a microcosmic form of this vision. In chapter six, having introduced the Trinity as 'the Good', Bonaventure sets out more coincidences of opposites belonging to the Trinity, whose contemplation ...'will lead the eye of our mind with great strength to a stupor of admiration' (ch. 6, 3). It seems that Bonaventure is preparing us for a kind of *ecstasis* by which we are drawn beyond the usual confines of our mind and disposed for union with God. The contemplation of opposites in chapter six reaches its summit with the coincidence of opposites in Jesus Christ. Christ is shown to unite in Himself opposing attributes of God as 'Being' and as 'Good' so that even these two ways to God in chapters five and six converge in Christ (ch. 6, 5-6).

The influence of St. Francis is another probable reason why Bonaventure gives the highest position to 'the Good' in the *Itinerarium*. Because Francis' experience of God was 'good', *Bonum* was the name that he often gave to God in his writings. One example is this prayer from his *Office of the Passion*:

Almighty, most holy most high and supreme God, all good, supreme good, totally good,  
 You Who alone are good, may we give back to You all praise, all glory, all grace, all  
 honour, all blessing, and all good. So be it. So be it. Amen.  
 (Cirino and Gallant, 2001, p. 217)

In the *Itinerarium*, Bonaventure interprets and theologises Francis' mystical experience. Francis knew the good God as the Trinity; both three and one; that is, plurality and unity, and thus, a coincidence of opposites. He often names God in his writings as the 'three in one', as in his *Praises of God* (3):

You are three and one, the Lord God of gods;  
 You are the good, all good, the highest good, (Armstrong *et al.*, 1999, p.109)

Contemplation of the *Summum Bonum* as both Trinity and Unity seems to have drawn Francis beyond his powers of reason into wonder. This can be discerned in chapter twenty three of the *Earlier Rule*. In verse 9, Francis names God as the *Summum Bonum*. In verse 11, he contemplates God as ...'Trinity and Unity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.' In the rest of this verse, Francis tries to articulate what is beyond his understanding. The torrent of descriptive names indicates a mind overwhelmed, in what Bonaventure calls ...'a stupor of admiration':

who, without beginning and end,  
 is unchangeable, invisible, indescribable, ineffable,

incomprehensible, unfathomable,  
 blessed, praiseworthy,  
 glorious, exalted,  
 sublime, most high,  
 gentle, lovable, delightful,  
 and totally desirable above all else  
 for ever.

Amen. (Armstrong *et al.*, 1999, p. 85-86)

Francis' experience of God as *Bonum* led him to contemplate Creation, including humanity, as *bonum*. His *Canticum of the Creatures* begins by addressing the ...'good Lord.' Then he praises God for the diverse goods in ...'all Your creatures', which have their common source in the *Summum Bonum*. And so we see that, in chapter six of the *Itinerarium*, dealing with 'the Good', Bonaventure situates Creation, as a ...'diffusion in time' of God's goodness and ...'a mere point or center in comparison to the immensity of the eternal goodness'(ch.6, 2).

Francis seems also to have contemplated the goodness of God in the coincidence of opposites in Christ. In Jesus, the Divine Word takes on a form and a life that is minor in the world. Francis referred to this mystery as the humility of Christ. Francis' prayer focused on Christ's humility, particularly as it was expressed in the Incarnation, the Passion and the Holy Eucharist. We can speculate from Francis' writing that such contemplation led him to surrender himself wholly to God, as is the intended effect of chapter six leading to chapter seven of the *Itinerarium*. I quote from Francis' *Letter to the Entire Order* (26-29):

O sublime humility!  
 O humble sublimity!  
 The Lord of the universe  
 God and the Son of God,  
 so humbles himself  
 that for our salvation  
 He hides Himself under an ordinary piece of bread!  
 Brothers, look at the humility of God,  
 and pour out your hearts before Him!  
 ...Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves,  
 that He Who gives Himself totally to you  
 may receive you totally! (Armstrong *et al.*, 1999, p. 118)

Because of his relationship with God as the *Summum Bonum*, Francis habitually saw the good in humanity and all creation. This charism eventually caused Franciscan spirituality to be summarised in the greeting, '*pax et bonum*' (L3C VIII 26). Francis focused his prayer on God Who is three and one; plurality and unity. He also focused on Jesus Christ in whom uncreated divinity is united to a created human nature. In the life of Jesus, he contemplated the Most High God's embrace of minority and poverty in the created world. Francis' desire to imitate this love of God, in which opposites are united, may have led him to seek union in the *Summum Bonum* with what he perceived as alien to himself. Hence, his embrace of the lepers (2C 9) and his mission to the

Muslim peoples in 1219. We may also consider his symbolic outreach to the ferocious wolf of Gubbio as 'Brother' (*Lfl* 21) and even Death as 'Sister' (*Ctc* 12). He called all others in creation 'Brother' or 'Sister' because of their common origin in the *Summum Bonum*. Francis persisted in seeing good even in those 'others' who were considered great sinners. When a priest was denounced to him for living with a woman, Francis publicly kissed the priests hands and spoke of the dignity of the Sacraments which they administered.<sup>5</sup> On another occasion, he converted a band of robbers by calling them 'Brothers' and offering them 'good bread and good wine' (*AC* 115). His mission clearly was 'to unite all things' in Christ (cf. Ephesians 1: 9-10). Thus, Francis' experience of the *Summum Bonum* led to the *pax* that he practiced and preached everywhere. We also find in the *Itinerarium* that the *Bonum* in chapter six leads us to the *pax* in chapter seven (ch. 7, 1):

It is here that the true person of peace rests in the quiet of the mind as in an interior Jerusalem. (Cirino and Raischl, 2002, p.393)

In conclusion, chapters five and six of the *Itinerarium* present two different ways of contemplating God. This dual approach could be connected with the reductive progression of the whole journey. There is also a discernible progression from chapter five to chapter six. The latter represents the summit of the 'illuminations', containing the mysteries of the Trinity, of Jesus Christ and of Creation. Chapters five and six prepare for chapter seven by the contemplation of illogical coincidences in the attributes of God. The coincidence of opposites leads the human person to transcend the limitations of reason, disposing him/her for union with God, described in chapter seven. The position of importance given to God as *Bonum* in chapter six reflects the mystical experience of St. Francis, which Bonaventure theologises in the *Itinerarium*. Francis contemplated opposites united in the *Summum Bonum*. Similarly, he was led to realise a loving union of opposites through his missionary endeavours in the world. Outreach to those furthest from his natural sympathies freed him from the barriers erected by reason between him and the 'other'. These efforts led Francis to surrender himself wholly to God and to receive ...'the peace of God which passes all understanding' (Philippians 4:7).

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## **Endnotes**

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All quotations from the *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* are taken from the translation by Zachary Hayes OFM in, Cirino, A. and Raischl, J. (2002) *The Journey Into God: A Forty Day Retreat with Bonaventure, Francis and Clare*, St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati.

The idea of the Good as self-diffusive is taken from Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, ch. 4, 1.

Abbreviations: *Itinerarium/It.* = *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*

Other abbreviations are as listed on p. 32 of *FA:ED* vol. 1., *The Saint*, Armstrong *et al.*, eds., 1999.

Bonaventure is quoting Pseudo-Dionysius from *The Mystical Theology* ch. 1, 1.

Story told by Stephen of Bourbon (1250-61) in, *FA:ED* vol. 2., *The Prophet*, Armstrong *et al.*, eds., 2000, p. 787-8.

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