

Saint Bonaventure and Justice

On one of my first climbs up Mount Subasio from Assisi to the hermitage of the Carceri, I entered a tiny chapel dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene where Blessed Barnabas Manassei da Terni is buried. I had never heard of him before but later learned that he was the founder of the *Mons Pietatis* or *Monti di Pietà*, a lending institution which attacked and helped break the back of usury in the Middle Ages. The longer I pondered this friar, the more I wondered why an activist was buried in a place of solitude and contemplation!

Calling to mind St. Francis' *Document on Solitude* written for a stay in places like the Carceri, I remembered the words of scripture he quoted in line 3: ". . . and they should first seek the reign of God and God's justice" [Mt 6:33]. At first, this quote seemed out of place for guiding those who wanted to spend time in solitude. I would have expected St. Francis to quote Jesus encouraging the disciples to come with him to an out of the way place and rest for a while

It was only when I connected Matthew 6:33 to St. Bonaventure's definition of justice that I began to understand why St. Francis chose such an appropriate scripture verse. In *The Six Days of Creation* St. Bonaventure defined justice as follows: "justice makes beautiful that which had been deformed" [1:34]. It was then that a trapdoor began to open for me.

We can apply this definition to what has been traditionally called the corporal works of mercy—to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, visit the imprisoned, bury the dead. One can see that these obvious deformities—some simply physical like giving food or clothing or shelter, or dealing with a person's illness or loss of dignity—are restored to beauty by carrying out any of these works of mercy

We can also take St. Bonaventure's meaning for justice and apply it to the gospel commandments of love. St. Bernard says that there are not two great commandments of love, but three, because he believes that we must first love ourselves before we attempt love of others or love of God.

First, love of self. When a person has a poor self image—or in Freudian terms, an inferiority complex—that deformity needs to be restored to beauty. It can be done by therapy or counseling. As a person begins to face this deformity of personality, whatever it may be, the conversation about self-regard can begin to raise the person's self image to see the goodness of who he or she is as created by God. Restoring to beauty one's self image, for Bonaventure, would be doing justice unto oneself.

Second, love of neighbor. At times our relationship with others—be they relative, friend or enemy—gets frayed and becomes deformed. Scripture advises us to leave our gift at the altar and first go be reconciled with our brother or sister. This reconciliation requires meeting with the other to discuss the deformity so that the relationship can be restored to the beauty it originally had or to the beginning of a beautiful relationship in regard to one's perceived enemy. Restoring

to beauty a broken relationship by reconciliation with another, for Bonaventure, would be doing justice unto the other.

Third, love of God. Sometimes our relationship with God gets deformed either through carelessness or sin. One can deal with this deformity either through spiritual dialogue/direction or the sacrament of reconciliation. Restoring the beauty of our relationship with God, for Bonaventure, would be doing justice unto God.

Perhaps an example that I experienced could demonstrate more clearly Bonaventure's wisdom about the concept of justice. For about eight years I worked in a retreat house—the Little Portion—in the south Bronx where we gave retreats free of charge to the poor. One day I received a phone call from a priest in Harlem who asked if he could bring street people, as he called them, for a retreat. We were accustomed to receiving retreatants from parishes and other social groups working in the poor areas of New York City, so we presumed the person setting up the retreat knew the people who were coming. This priest, however, did not know who would be coming until the day itself when he would gather people from the streets to bring them to us. Nevertheless, we told him to come. We teamed up with some Secular Franciscans to conduct the retreat. When the retreatants arrived on Friday evening, we gave them a room, a meal, and began the retreat. We went all through Saturday with input sessions and prayer. And it was during the evening meal on Saturday that we discovered it was the birthday of one of the male retreatants.

Since we always had volunteer cooks for our retreats, that weekend a Franciscan Missionary of Mary was cooking because that very day was her fiftieth anniversary of vows, and since she had been a cook her entire life, she wanted to spend her anniversary cooking for the poor. I went to the kitchen and told her of the birthday and that we needed a cake. She, with a bit of an accent, said, "I no make cake!" So I told her I had a cake in the freezer which we microwaved and she covered with icing, topping it off with a candle. She carried the cake out to him, holding it before him. While all sang happy birthday, he was in tears. So Sister said to him: "Why you cry?" "Because no one ever before in my life has given me a birthday cake," he answered. For that one moment, a deformity of his life had been dealt with, and that "naked" cake restored beauty to that man.

"Justice makes beautiful that which had been deformed," says Bonaventure. Why would it be of any importance to restore a deformity to beauty? When we look at God, at the One who is Beauty itself, then restoring any deformity to beauty is to make that person more like the One who is Beauty itself. That person is made to be more like God is. And that, according to Bonaventure, is to do justice! It is part of the process of divinization of humanity.

To return to Blessed Barnabas buried at the Carceri, it becomes clear why Francis chose Matthew 6:33 as a guiding verse for time in solitude. His *Document on Solitude* was written for his brothers who were itinerants, on the road two by two, preaching to the people. Upon their return to Assisi, he invited them into solitude fully aware that any ministry that is done without a backdrop of prayer and contemplation becomes a "noisy gong" or "my" ministry. But those who approach ministry in their lives drawing on the wellsprings of prayer—meditation and contemplation—in solitude, become fountains of living waters themselves and, according to our brother Bonaventure, do justice when they help make beautiful that which had been deformed.

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