

Spiritual Motherhood

by

André R. Cirino OFM

Right before Advent in the year 1259, St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio had just completed an extended period of intense prayer and reflection on Mount LaVerna in Tuscany, from which experience he composed his renowned masterpiece—*The Journey of the Human Person into God*. Soon after this, he realized he had some free time to himself before Advent would begin and wanted to spend it on another meditative pursuit. So he decided through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to focus on the incarnation of Jesus Christ, choosing a most unique approach by reflecting on the liturgical feasts that highlight Jesus' childhood—Annunciation, Nativity, Holy Name, Epiphany and Presentation. It occurred to him that like Mary, a human person can also *conceive, birth, name, search* for Jesus with the Magi and *present* the Child Jesus back to God.

Eric Doyle OFM, in the introduction to his translation of this little meditative work, noted that the entire reflection deals with what is called “spiritual motherhood,” whereby every Christian—male and female—would be able to do what Mary herself did as his Mother.

After using this writing for many retreats over the last several years, I have come to realize that St. Bonaventure is attempting to help us deal with the reality of grace in our lives. Let me explain by taking a look at the five liturgical feasts and the meaning they each convey.

In the first feast of the *Annunciation* (25 March—notice, 9 months exactly to Christmas), Bonaventure remarks that Mary said her “yes” to God and became pregnant with the Child. She didn't know fully what it all would mean, but had the strength to give her consent to God. What is this conception? It is what we Franciscans call the highest good come from heaven, the grace of God present in Mary's womb. With this conception Mary was literally “full of grace.” So each time the Holy Spirit overshadows us, we too

conceive a grace of God. And just as conception is precious and unique for any woman, so too is the conception of a grace from God a unique, mystical moment.

Bonaventure notes that Mary goes up to the hill country to be with her pregnant cousin Elizabeth perhaps to seek advice and learn from her. So too does a person who conceives a grace from God need to seek the advice of good people—spiritual obstetricians such as spiritual directors. He even cautions one to avoid those who might kill the new conception—a type of spiritual abortion.

How many times have we conceived a grace from God? When we received this grace, did we feel it stirring within us? Perhaps an example would help us here. As a religious myself, I remember almost precisely to the moment in my life when God called me to consider becoming a member of the Franciscan family. I conceived a grace and was pregnant with this call. I'll continue with this example as we go through the rest of the liturgical feasts.

In the second feast of the *Nativity* (25 December)—we all know the story so well—Mary birthed her child in Bethlehem. Bonaventure comments here that after a person has conceived a grace, one brings this grace to birth by doing that for which the grace was intended. He adds two synonyms for the word grace—gift and good. St. Francis in his *Letter to the Faithful* writes that all of us are mothers of Jesus Christ, and that we birth him *by doing good*. Perhaps Bonaventure's use of the word “good” is an allusion to Francis' letter.

A physical pregnancy is usually brought to birth when the fetus has matured or by Cæsarian surgery. While the analogy of physical to spiritual pregnancy/birth may seem to limp a bit here, nevertheless a grace is brought to birth when we feel it is ripe/mature, or like a woman who schedules and goes through with Cæsarian surgery. So to continue with the example of my call to religious life, this grace was birthed in my life when I did what the grace intended, namely, rang the doorbell of St. Francis Seraphic Seminary and entered the Franciscan formation program.

What graces have you put into practice or birthed in your life?

In the third feast of the *Holy Name* (3 January), St. Bonaventure notes that his parents gave the Child the name Jesus meaning “one who saves.” So too when we conceive and birth a grace, then we must also name the grace for ourselves. And just like a mother may birth more than one child giving each of them their own name, so too do we conceive many graces and possibly birth them. But do we come to the point of naming these graces, these “children” if you will?

My call to the Franciscan way of life was a grace conceived and birthed that has the name “vocation.” My “child—vocation” was an “infant” when I entered the formation program of the Franciscans. As I met with different challenges and obstacles in the various stages of formation, I realized that I conceived and birthed another grace—a “sister” to the grace “vocation” whom I was able to name “perseverance.”

In the fourth feast of the *Epiphany* (traditionally 6 January) Matthew’s gospel [2:1-12] recounts the story of the Magi or Kings who seek out the Child, adore him and bring him gifts as well. St. Bonaventure sees the three faculties of the human person—*memory*, *intellect*, *will*—as the three “Magi/Kings” within us who go in search of our children.

Perhaps this is better illustrated by continuing with my example above. Whenever I encountered problems or obstacles on my Franciscan journey, I needed the grace of perseverance to operate within me to strengthen me to face the problems or overcome the obstacles that threatened my child “vocation.” My King—*memory* helped me recall that I had a “child” called “perseverance”; my King—*intellect* helped me understand why I needed this “child’s” assistance; and my King—*will* helped me make the decision to go and search for this “child—perseverance.” Once the problem or obstacle had been resolutely dealt with, I was in adoration of these “children/graces” functioning in my life and offered God gifts of thanks, praise, glory.

In the fifth feast of the *Presentation* of the Child Jesus in the Temple (2 February), Jesus was brought to the Temple to be offered up to God, returning to God this highest good of all creation. St. Bonaventure describes our Trinitarian God as “overflowing goodness,” a goodness that is constantly being exchanged among the Three Persons as well as with creation, for God remarked at the end of each of the six days of creation in Genesis [1: 3, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25] that it is good, the creation of humanity being very good [1:31].

And we know from Matthew 19:17 that “*only* God is good.” If “*only* God is good,” then each time we experience goodness—simply as Matthew 10:42 notes, sharing a cup of cold water or our table, or caring for the sick—we experience God. And within the Trinity, goodness is constantly being exchanged, overflowing from one Person to the Other. Then in imitation of the Trinity, we must let this goodness overflow to others from us.

Gerald Manley Hopkins, aware of St. Bonaventure’s description of God, wrote in poem 155:

Thee, God, I come from, to thee go,
All day long I like fountain flow.

To hold on to any good would short-circuit the Trinitarian process. To let goodness flow from us in our daily lives makes God present. Moreover, Matthew 10:23 tells us that if we plant one seed, we’ll receive a hundredfold. And whenever we let some good overflow from us, goodness gets replenished and stronger in our lives!

My “child—vocation” is more than fifty years old, a mature adult. At each quarter century mark, a celebration was had with family, friars and friends. They were moments to enter God’s temple gratefully to present this “child—vocation” to God. And God has blessed me abundantly with graces—many “children” to continue living my Franciscan life.

St. Bonaventure’s meditation on these five feasts from Mary’s perspective as mother can become the tool that helps us realize how blessed we are, how many graces we’ve

conceived, birthed, named, sought out and returned to God. Whenever we are gentle, kind, peaceful, generous, believing, hoping, loving, we are birthing the child Jesus because we make goodness present and this goodness is God!

Copies of the booklet of this precious meditation by St. Bonaventure—*Five Feasts of the Child Jesus: Bringing Forth Christ* along with Eric Doyle's helpful introduction—can be obtained from:

Convent of the Incarnation

Fairacres

Oxford, England OX41TB

Tel: 01865 721301

Fax 01865 790 860

editor@slgpress.co.uk