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SAINT BONAVENTURE
AND THE DIVINE ORDER OF CREATION

by

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[Image: *God as Geometer*, Anon, circa 1220 - 1230]

SAINT BONAVENTURE AND THE DIVINE ORDER OF CREATION

JOSEPH MILNE

*For just as man consists of body, soul and spirit, so in the same way does the scripture.*¹

When we read the great medieval mystics and theologians we might easily get the impression it was an age of serenely ordered knowledge. This is certainly the impression we might get when reading the two great contemporaries St Bonaventure (1221-1274) and St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Their writings have an assuredness, tranquillity and grace that gives no hint of the controversies they each confronted in their times. As scholastics and as spiritual guides their theological work centres on the relationship between the Creation and the Creator, or the temporal manifest and the eternal unmanifest. This means there must be two kinds of knowledge that can be brought together.

Two major challenges faced them in the thirteenth century. First, the discovery of the works of Aristotle, and second, a new concern for the ages of the world and eschatology. Aristotle opened up a new way of enquiring into nature and into the coherence or logic of thinking. Up until this time Platonism had played the major role in shaping the vision of the world and of Christian mysticism, mainly through sections of the *Timaeus* and indirectly through the writings of St Augustine, Dionysius, Boethius and short summaries of Proclus. The original Greek texts were completely unknown to the Latin West up until the thirteenth century, with the exception of John Scotus Eriugena in the ninth century. From the Christian perspective, Plato and Aristotle represented the finest of ‘pagan’ philosophy. And ‘philosophy’ was what contemplated the wisdom of the natural world.

A great part of theological thinking was given to reconciling ‘natural philosophy’ with the Scriptures. Interestingly, the Scriptures have very little say about the natural world or about cosmology in the refined Greek sense. Apart from the symbolic creation accounts in Genesis, there is no elaborate cosmology in the Bible. Rather, Scripture speaks in terms of *events*, of an unfolding history of human and divine interactions. There is no ‘metaphysics’ in the Bible, only a sacred narrative, encompassing the beginning and end of all things through a transformative sacred history. It was therefore perfectly reasonable for theology to consult natural philosophy concerning those things that were known through rational enquiry. Scripture embodied *revelation* rather than rational enquiry. More than this, Scripture was itself an *event* in the unfolding of sacred history. This meant that Scripture was *received* in an entirely different manner than rational enquiry. While rational enquiry proceeds on the initiative of the enquirer, the understanding of Scripture proceeds on the initiative of the *revealed*. The understanding in the soul becomes God’s work in the soul. To put that in medieval language, the study of Scripture is redemptive and transformative of the soul. It is not explanatory of the natural world.

¹ Origen *On First Principles* Book IV, Chapter II

Thus far there is no problem. Faith and reason are not in conflict. They belong to different modes of knowledge, and to different orders of reality. A difficulty arose, however, with Aristotle's conception of the eternity of the world, the world as always existent. This presented a particular challenge to the Franciscans, for some of whom the life of St Francis marked the beginning of a new era of history. The world was understood to have three ages. The first age was that of the Old Testament, which was equated with the Father, the First Person of the Divine Trinity. The second age was that of the New Testament, equated with the Second Person of the Divine Trinity, Christ the Son. The third age was that of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Divine Trinity. The mystical experiences of St Francis of Assisi were understood to indicate the beginning of this third age. Taken in its most radical sense, the dawning age of the Holy Spirit meant that the Scriptures were now superseded. The Holy Spirit directly communicated with the soul. Not only did this mean the Scriptures were superseded, literacy itself was regarded as redundant. A group of Franciscans, known as the Spirituals, regarded all learning as superfluous, and its pursuit as mere hubris. The Franciscan Spirituals were influenced by the millenarianism of Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135 – 1202) who had previously expounded these three ages or eras of the world corresponding with the Three Person of the Divine Trinity.

This new eschatological form of mysticism challenged not only the Aristotelian notion of the eternity of the world, but also the very basis of scholasticism. Bonaventure, who had early been drawn to the Franciscan order, was appointed by Rome to resolve the conflict between the literate scholars and the Spirituals within the Franciscan order. Suddenly he had to adapt from being a scholar to an administrator. He managed to combine the two roles by becoming a supreme spiritual guide. From this moment on his theological works are directly concerned with bringing together the eschatological vision of the Franciscans, its devotional mysticism, and its scholasticism.

Here we find a difference in the approaches of Aquinas and Bonaventure. In *Summa Theologica* Part 1, Question 39 Aquinas refutes Joachim's understanding of the Trinity as making the Persons into distinct essences and so breaking their unity in God.² This is very subtle theology. Bonaventure's approach is very different. While Aquinas leans heavily towards the subtlest metaphysics and ontology, clearly an influence of Aristotle, Bonaventure remains rooted in the

² *Summa Theologica* 1a, q. 39, a. 5 Aquinas says: I answer that: Concerning this, the abbot Joachim erred in asserting that as we can say "God begot God," so we can say "Essence begot essence": considering that, by reason of the divine simplicity God is nothing else but the divine essence. In this he was wrong, because if we wish to express ourselves correctly, we must take into account not only the thing which is signified, but also the mode of its signification as above stated (Article 4). Now although "God" is really the same as "Godhead," nevertheless the mode of signification is not in each case the same. For since this word "God" signifies the divine essence in Him that possesses it, from its mode of signification it can of its own nature stand for person. Thus the things which properly belong to the persons, can be predicated of this word, "God," as, for instance, we can say "God is begotten" or is "Begetter," as above explained (Article 4). The word "essence," however, in its mode of signification, cannot stand for Person, because it signifies the essence as an abstract form. Consequently, what properly belongs to the persons whereby they are distinguished from each other, cannot be attributed to the essence. For that would imply distinction in the divine essence, in the same way as there exists distinction in the "supposita." (translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920)

early Christian tradition of the symbolic reading of Scripture. For him the Creation is itself disclosive of God. The manifest order of things has a sacred sense just as the Scriptures do. Scripture, in speaking with natural things and events as its object, adopts the vocabulary of God whose Word manifests the world. For Bonaventure, the Scriptures correspond in their unfoldment with the unfoldment of the world, from beginning to end. He writes in the *Breviloquium*:

And so the whole course of this world is shown by Scripture to run in a most orderly fashion from beginning to end, like an artfully composed melody. In it, one can contemplate, by means of the succession of events, the diversity, multiplicity, and symmetry, the order, rectitude, and excellence, of the many judgements that proceed from the divine wisdom governing the universe. Just as no one can appreciate the loveliness of a song unless one's perspective embraces it as whole, so none of us can see the beauty of the order and governance of the world without an integral view of its course. But since no mortal lives long enough to see all this with bodily eyes, nor can any individual foretell the future, the Holy Spirit has provided us with the book of sacred scripture, whose length corresponds to God's governance of the universe.³

Scripture, then, in its unfolding story from Genesis to Apocalypse, embraces the whole of creation, from beginning to end. This means that it speaks in such a manner as can encompass all that is and all that comes to pass in its ultimate significance, revealing to limited human comprehension what is eternally present in God. In explaining how Scripture can accomplish this Bonaventure calls upon the tradition going back to the Church Fathers of the multiple senses of Scripture, a tradition of scriptural contemplation that came to an end with the rise of nominalism at the close of the Middle Ages.⁴ It is therefore worthwhile hearing how Bonaventure describes it. "It is right that Scripture should have this three-fold sense above the literal sense, for this is appropriate to the subject matter of Scripture, its hearer or student, its origin, and its end".⁵ He explains then in detail what he means by this:

It is appropriate to its subject matter, for this is a teaching, which deals with God, with Christ, with the works of redemption, and with the content of belief. In terms of its substance, its subject is God: in terms of its virtue, Christ; and in terms of all these things together, the content of belief. Now, God is three and one: one in essence and three in person. Therefore, the Scripture, which is concerned with God, contains within the unity of the letter a threefold understanding. The same is true of Christ: though the Word is one, *all things* are said to have been *made through him*, and shine forth in him, so that his wisdom is both manifold and one. Similarly, though the works of redemption are many, they all look toward the one principal offering of Christ. Finally, the content of belief as such sheds its light in different ways according to the differing states of believers. Scripture, then, responding to all these circumstances, gives us many-faceted meanings in one true text.⁶

³ *Breviloquium* Prologue 2. 4, translated by Dominic V. Monti (Franciscan Institute Publications, Bonaventure University, New York, 2005)

⁴ See Hans Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Baker Academic 2017) p. 7-9

⁵ *Breviloquium* Prologue 4. 2.

⁶ *Breviloquium* Prologue 4. 2.

It is clear from this passage that for Bonaventure the mystery of the Divine Trinity permeates all his thinking. Not only does it serve as a key to understanding Scripture, Scripture itself manifests the Divine Trinity everywhere as part of what it is revealing. That is to say, Scripture reflects the mind and work of God in its structure and language. It is not merely *about* God and the mystery of his work, it is itself an articulation of that work, and hence the contemplation of Scripture is redemptive, responding to the different states of believers. As Bonaventure puts it a moment later, “Now God speaks not with words alone, but also through deeds, because with God to say is to do, and to do is to say. All created things, being the result of God’s action, point towards their cause. So, in Scripture, which has been handed on to us by God, deeds no less than words have meaning”.⁷

That Scripture unfolds through an ongoing narrative means that every event it narrates embodies divine activity. But also, as observed earlier, that the narrative has a structure that encompasses time. Time for Bonaventure is not a neutral medium in which things befall, which is how he sees Aristotle’s notion of time without beginning or end. One might similarly consider space as a mere emptiness into which things take form. Such conceptions suggest to Bonaventure that aspects of creation are not informed by any ordering principle, and as such fail to reveal anything about their origin in God. Time, in the Scriptures, is shaped by Christ at the centre, with the narrative of all things coming into being through him and the sojourn towards his coming into the world, and the journey thereafter of his redemptive work towards the end of time and the final judgement of all things. Although in this he adopts a threefold shape to history, unlike Joachim who names each period by a Person of the Divine Trinity, Bonaventure sees Christ as the centre around whom the three ages take shape.

This leads us to the question of how Bonaventure treats Plato and Aristotle and their conception of the nature of things. There is a most interesting passage in one of his sermons on how he sees the relation of Plato and Aristotle with one another:

Because Plato related all certain knowledge to the intelligible or ideal world, he was justly criticised by Aristotle, not because he was wrong in affirming the Ideas and the eternal reasons, since Augustine praises him for this; but because – despising the sensible world – he wished to reduce all certain knowledge to the Ideas. In doing this, he would seem to provide a firm basis for the way of wisdom which proceeds according to the eternal reasons; but he destroyed the way of science which proceeds according to created reasons. On the other hand, Aristotle provided a firm foundation for the way of science while neglecting the way of wisdom. It seems, therefore, that among the philosophers, the word of wisdom is granted to Plato and the word of science to Aristotle.⁸

Making Plato and Aristotle complementary in this way was to become standard in Western thought, as exemplified in Raphael’s famous portrait. But there is a deeper concern underlying

⁷ *Breviloquium* Prologue 4. 4.

⁸ Bonaventure, “Christ the One Teacher of All,” in *What Manner of Man: Sermons on Christ by St Bonaventure*, translated by Zachery Hayes (Franciscan Herald press, Chicago, 1989)

Bonaventure's acceptance of Aristotle's critique of Plato. From the Christian perspective, the created realm has sacred meaning. As we have just seen, it is God's word in events. Therefore to affirm that the only true reality is the Ideas or eternal reasons, and that the 'sensible world' may be despised, contradicts the significance of the Christian understanding of Creation. Whether or not Plato is justly criticised by Aristotle is another question. Nevertheless, there is certainly a tendency in Neoplatonism to 'discount' the sensible realm or to allocate to it an inferior ontological status. Aristotle held that the 'form' or 'Idea' must be immanent in things, otherwise they would not exist. It was Augustine who reconciled Plato and Aristotle by asserting that the form "must be transcendent and immanent, both present in the concrete singular and yet beyond any passing things".⁹ This reconciliation is necessary since the very essence of Christianity is the "Word became flesh". The Incarnation is the full manifestation of the eternal Word, redeeming not only humanity but the whole cosmos. As Eriugena had put it in the ninth century, the eternal becomes temporal, the infinite becomes finite, and the invisible becomes visible.¹⁰ This is the very heart of the Christian mystery of the Eucharist. Christian mysticism is not a withdrawal from the world, but a tracing and gathering of all things into God. And this 'gathering' lies at the heart of the sacred unfolding of history and the apocalyptic aspect of Bonaventure's theology, springing from St Francis' new affirmation of the natural world and the presence of Christ in all things.

Bonaventure's key to seeing that natural world as God's revelation of wisdom is 'exemplarism', by which he means that all created things are 'traces' of God and his wisdom. In the *Collations on the Six Days* he elaborates this in his own inimitable way:

Both reason and faith lead to these splendours of exemplarity. But beyond, there is a threefold help for rising to the exemplary principles, that is, the sensible creatures, the rational creatures, and the sacramental scriptures: and this help contains a mystery. As regards the first, the whole world is a shadow, a way, a trace; a book with writing *front and back*. Indeed, in every creature there is a refulgence of the divine exemplar, but mixed with darkness: hence it resembles some kind of opacity combined with light. Also, it is a way of leading to the exemplar. As you notice that a ray of light coming in through a window is coloured according to the shades of different panes, so the divine ray shines differently in each creature and in the various properties. Hence, in Wisdom: *She...appears to them in ways*. (Wis. 6:16) Again, it is a trace of God's wisdom. Wherefore the creature exists only as a kind of imitation of God's wisdom, as a certain plastic representation of it. And for all these reasons, it is a kind of book *written...without*. (Ap. 5:1)¹¹

⁹ Christopher M. Cullen, *Bonaventure* (Oxford University Press, 2006) p. 73

¹⁰ In the *Periphyseon* Eriugena writes: For just as God is both beyond all things and in all things—for He Who only truly is, is the essence of all things, and while He is whole in all things He does not cease to be whole beyond all things, whole in the world, whole around the world, whole in the sensible creature, whole in the intelligible creature, whole creating the universe, whole created in the universe, whole in the whole of the universe and whole in its parts, since He is both the whole and the part, just as He is neither the whole nor the part—in the same way human nature in its own world (in its own subsistence) in its own universe and in its invisible and visible parts is whole in itself, and whole in its whole, and whole in its parts, and its parts are whole in themselves and whole in the whole. (*Periphyseon*, IV.759a–b) translated by Inglis Patrick Sheldon-Williams and John J. O'Meara, (Montreal/Paris: Bellarmin, 1987)

¹¹ Bonaventure, *Collations on the Six Days*, translated by Jose de Vinck (St Anthony Guild Press, 1970) XII 14.

It is clear in this passage that Bonaventure understands an ascent of the mind through created things in a manner clearly Platonic, seeing “the whole world is a shadow, a way, a trace; a book”. Yet this in no way negates the created world. On the contrary, it becomes the way to God:

And so, when the soul sees these things, it seems to it that it should go through them from shadow to light, from way to end, from trace to truth, from book to veritable knowledge which is God. To read this book is the privilege of the highest contemplatives, not of natural philosophers: for the former alone know the essence of things, and do not consider them only as traces.¹²

Exemplarism extends also to the soul, which is a scroll or book within:

At the same time, it is a mirror, for it receives and represents all things: it has the nature of light, so that it may even pass judgement on things. For the whole world is described in the soul. It is also an image. Since it is both light and mirror containing images of things, it is an image too. And hence a scroll written within.¹³

Given that the Divine Trinity is always present in Bonaventure’s thought, after nature without and the soul within, there must be a third mode of knowledge of things. This is “sacramental Scripture”:

For the whole of Scripture is the heart of God, the mouth of God, the tongue of God, the pen of God, *a scroll written within and without*. Hence in the Psalm: *My heart overflows with a goodly theme; as I sing my ode to the King, my tongue is nimble as the pen of a skilful scribe*. The heart is of God, the mouth of the Father, the tongue of the Son, the pen of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴

The Scriptures, then, are a third manifestation of the wisdom of God. It is worth noting here how Bonaventure describes the Scriptures in the language or speech of the Scriptures themselves. He does not resort to a metaphysical language but remains with the symbolic language of Scripture. The ‘metaphysics’ of things belongs to the knowledge of the natural philosophers. Hence Bonaventure explains the nature of the Scriptures by way of Psalm 44, the internal language of Scripture through which Scripture defines itself. He is drawing upon a long tradition in which the Holy Spirit, as the ‘pen’ of God, reveals divine wisdom through the vocabulary of created things and the events and history of the world. Scripture speaks of created things as revealing divine wisdom. The principle here is that there is no speech suitable or adequate to God but his own speech which is the creation. The whole purpose of the creation is to reveal God. So contemplating it spiritually leads the soul back to God. “We need not go down to the other sciences in order to gain certainty before having witness on the mountain, that is, of Christ, Elias and Moses, meaning of the New Testament, of the Prophets and the

¹² *Collations on the Six Days* XII 15.

¹³ *Collations on the Six Days* XII 16.

¹⁴ *Collations on the Six Days* XII 17.

Law.”¹⁵ “God’s Pen, that is, the Holy Spirit” writes “in the present events past, the present and the future”.

In writing in this way the Scriptures reveal not only eternal things, but the unfolding of the Creation from beginning to end, and the journey of the soul to God through the ascent of understanding. The metaphor of the ‘journey’ can serve as a key to Scripture in tracing a sacred history. The world is not a mere static stage upon which persons and events come and go. It is a divine unfolding of a mystery, comprehended like a melody which has meaning as it unfolds and in the comprehension of its architecture as whole, as we noted earlier from Bonaventure. The sense of time that makes music comprehensible is like the sense of time that makes the narrative of a story comprehensible.

This ‘narrative sense’, as Paul Ricoeur calls it, is an often overlooked aspect of natural human understanding.¹⁶ It is innate to us just as the ethical sense. Historically, it has precedence over abstract thought. Great phrases like “Once upon a time”, and “In the beginning” strike home in our consciousness instantaneously. They touch a recognition before reflection and instantly engage us, for we recognise our own lives as engaged participants in a story. Further, like the unfolding melody or the journey, the narrative sense gathers in multiple meanings at the same time. Like the drop of a stone in a pool, meanings radiate in all directions. The static language of metaphysics, to which much of modern reflection on mysticism has become rather confined, misses this engaging and transformative aspect of narrative understanding. And so biblical language remains with the narrative mode of understanding, in kinship with myth and saga, drawing a spiritual response from the reader rather than an explanatory interpretation. This is what Bonaventure calls ‘contemplation’, where the soul is drawn up into the divine presence and transformed by luminosity. The American Catholic novelist Flannery O’Connor speaks of how the meaning of a story lies within story itself:

The meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it. A story is a way to say something that can’t be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate. When anybody asks what a story is about, the only proper thing is to tell him to read the story. The meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning but experienced meaning, and the purpose of making statements about the meaning of a story is only to help you experience that meaning more fully.¹⁷

The medieval scholar and mystic would say exactly the same about Scripture. But he would say more: that Scripture contains all wisdom insofar as it reveals through the speech of created things the mystery of God. And as a narrative it also discloses the meaning the world, not in terms of abstract propositions, but as the unfolding of an accumulative series of events. It is for this reason that Bonaventure is especially interested in the arc of meaning from Genesis to

¹⁵ *Collations on the Six Days* XII 17.

¹⁶ See Paul Ricoeur *Time and Narrative*, translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (University Press of Chicago, 1983) especially Volume 1 Chapter 5.

¹⁷ “Writing Short Stories,” in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrer, Straus, and Giroux, 1961), p. 96

Apocalypse. And here he finds a remarkable parallel between this Scriptural narrative of sacred history and the journey of the soul to mystical union.

He sees this arc of history present already in the seven days of creation. Here the question of time comes to the fore as Bonaventure rejects St Augustine's interpretation of Genesis in which all things were made simultaneously, because for Bonaventure the seven days of creation also prefigure the whole of history:

Now God could have done all these things simultaneously, but preferred to accomplish them over a succession of times. First of all, this would serve as a clear and distinct manifestation of God's power, wisdom and goodness. Secondly, there is a fitting correspondence between these operations and having various 'days' or times. Finally, the primal production of the world ought to contain the seeds of all things that would later be accomplished, as a prefiguration of future ages; thus, these seven days would contain seminally, as it were, the division of all times to come, as we have already explained above through the succession of the seven ages of history. That is why, to the six days of work was added a seventh day of rest: a day to which no dusk is ascribed [in Scripture] – not that this day was not followed by night, but because it was to prefigure the repose of souls that shall have no end.¹⁸

Needless to say, the seven days and the seven ages of the world set aside the Aristotelian notion of the eternity of the world and the formless notion of time. Yet Bonaventure is also taking a bold step in rejecting St Augustine's purely instantaneous conception of Creation, which he sees as too Platonic in the sense that Aristotle criticises. This also relates to the understanding of creation *ex nihilo*. There is no primordial unformed 'matter' or 'empty time and space' into which the world was placed by God. By creating out of nothing the divine act of creation demonstrates the 'one' principle alone that brings being into existence from no prior existence of any kind whatsoever. This is what Bonaventure calls God's 'power' which is demonstrated in the creation, along with his wisdom and goodness. It illustrates that the creation is *entirely* the work of God, in its origin, in its unfolding history, and in its end. The number seven is also a key to the form of things throughout creation: the seven ages of history, the seven deadly sins, seven sacraments, seven virtues, seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the seven beatitudes. All these things have a manifest existence as 'works' or 'events' in the sacred narrative of time.

Bonaventure returns to the number seven as a key to understanding the divine order of things throughout his writings. In his *Collations on the Six Days* he proposes that the number seven "is the number of universality, as found in the major and minor worlds, and in God",¹⁹ that is to say, in the universe, in man, and in God.

But the seven-fold series contains a mystery. For every proportion and proportionality are dependent on a three-fold and four-fold series: because, by necessity, wherever there is proportionality, it must exist in relation to four terms, either in the order of fact or in the order of reason.

¹⁸ *Breviloquium* 2. 5.

¹⁹ *Collations on the Six Days* XVI 7

Now, this seven-fold series, either in the sensible world or in the minor world [man], arises out of the archetypal world, where causal principles exist in a seven-fold series. For God exists by reason of a triple-formed cause, origin, exemplary, and final, and he cannot exist in any other mode. Hence the Apostle says: *For from Him and through Him and unto Him are all things* (Romans 11:36). But the principle of causality is dependent upon four things: height of power, depth of wisdom, breadth of benevolence, and length of eternity, so that as the Apostle says, *you may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth* (Ephesians 3:18). Power creates, wisdom governs, benevolence achieves, and eternity preserves.²⁰

In passages such as these we might wonder if Bonaventure is drawing out the meaning of Scripture or fitting meaning onto it. In one sense, typical of the medieval scholastic, he is ‘reconciling’ natural philosophy and Scripture. But he is doing this in such a manner as they become mutually illuminating. There is a correspondence between the three modes of knowledge: the natural world, the soul, and Scripture – the ‘three books’ which are given to humanity to read. In this sense, the knowledge gained through natural philosophy, if pursued reverently, and the knowledge gained through meditative introspection, bear the light of divine truth and wisdom and so are recognised to arise from the one Primary cause which is God. Also, the narrative form of Scripture and its fullness of multiple meanings orients the mind in such a manner as to comprehend different orders of meaning all at once.

We have already observed how Bonaventure sees the six days of creation, with the seventh as rest, as also containing the seeds of the unfolding sacred history of the world. In his *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* he builds or traces six steps of mystical ascent of the soul to mystical union with God. The six steps unfold in three main stages, reflecting the Divine Trinity and the three modes of knowledge or the three ‘books’ of nature, the soul, and the attributes of God. The three modes are each divided into two, making six steps with a seventh step of rest in mystical union, the final rest of the soul after God’s rest after the six days of creation. It is worth outlining these six steps as we shall see how they call upon many of the aspects of Bonaventure’s theology we have already discussed.

The first step is through speculation on the universe, prepared through dedication and prayer since the ascent of the soul to God is brought about through grace. As Bonaventure puts it, “By so praying, we are given light to discern the steps of the soul’s ascent to God. For we are so created that the material universe itself is a ladder by which we may ascend to God.”²¹ To a large extent the first step presents a map for the soul to orient itself for the ascent, reminding it that it must learn to trace God in created things before it can ascend further. The way of seeing the created world is divided into three modes:

In the first way of seeing, the observer considers things in themselves and sees in them weight, number, and measure: weight in respect to the place towards which things incline; number, by which things are distinguished; and measure, by which things are determined.

²⁰ *Collations on the Six Days* XVI 8 -9

²¹ *Itinerarium* 1:2

Hence he sees in them mode, species, and order, as well as substance, power, and activity. From all these considerations the observer can rise, as from a vestige, to the knowledge of the immense power, wisdom, and goodness of the Creator.²²

Here Bonaventure uses one his most important terms in perceiving things: to apprehend them as *vestiges*, from the Latin *vestigio*. This term has been translated in different ways by different translators, some giving “traces”, some “footsteps” and some “footprints”. The meaning is that, whatever is perceived through the senses, once considered in themselves the mind is led to knowledge of the “power, wisdom, and goodness of the Creator”. Something of God is communicated through the order of created things, beyond and yet through what can be distinguished of them in themselves. From this the soul moves to the second way of perceiving the created order:

In the second way of seeing, the way of faith, the believer considers this world in its origin, development, and end. For *by faith we understand that the world was fashioned by the word of God*; by faith we believe that the periods of the three laws of nature, of the Scriptures, and of grace followed one another and have flowed on in a most orderly way.²³

It is natural for the mind to ponder the origin, development and end of the world. Here Bonaventure shows that this may be apprehended through three kinds of law: of nature, Scripture and grace. While the law of nature may be grasped by the unaided reason, Scripture reveals how all things come into being through the Word, and that the greatest law is the law of grace, the *goodness* that is the cause and end of all things. This takes us to the third way of perceiving the created order:

In the third way of seeing, he who investigates with his reason sees that some things merely exist, that others exist and live, that still others exist, live, and discern. He also sees that the first of these are the lesser ones, the second are intermediate, and the third are the better. Likewise, he sees that some things are merely corporeal, while others are partly corporeal and partly spiritual. From this observation he realises that others are wholly spiritual, better and of more dignity than the first two modes of being.²⁴

Here the hierarchical order of creatures is observed: things that exist, that live, and discern. Also, here distinctions are observed between changeable things and permanent or eternal things. Attention is drawn to the order and beauty and wisdom of things. The movement of consideration is from lower to higher, but also from lesser to greater, from part to whole, since the higher levels include and *inform* the lower levels and do not discard them. Also:

In like manner, manifold activity, whether natural, cultural, or moral, by its infinitely multiple variety, shows forth the immensity of that power, art, and goodness, which is for all things “the cause of being, the basis of understanding, and the norm of orderly conduct”.²⁵

²² *Itinerarium* 1:11

²³ *Itinerarium* 1:12

²⁴ *Itinerarium* 1:13

²⁵ *Itinerarium* 1:14. The quoted passage is from St Augustine *The City of God* VIII, 4

This brings us to the second step of mystical ascent, in which the soul begins to discern God in all creatures:

We may behold God in the mirror of visible creation, not only by considering creatures as vestiges of God, but also by seeing Him in them; for He is present in them by His essence, His power, and His presence. And because this is a higher way of considering than the preceding one, it follows as the second level of contemplation, on which we ought to be led to the contemplation of God in every creature that enters our mind through the bodily senses.²⁶

This is a significant shift of perception, in which creatures are not only considered as vestiges of God, but more profoundly “by seeing Him in them; for He is present in them by His essence, His power, and His presence”. God is not merely to be discerned as vestiges or footsteps of God, but also as present ‘within’ them. After describing how the five senses receive impressions of the world and the order, beauty and justice of them, Bonaventure describes how, through these things, we may perceive God as the presence of the Word:

Yet these activities are vestiges in which we can see our God. For the perceived species is a similitude generated in the medium and then impressed on the organ itself, and through this impression it leads us to its starting point, that is, to the object to be known. Hence this process manifestly suggests that the Eternal Light begets of Himself a Likeness or a co-equal, constubstantial, and co-eternal Splendour; that He Who is the image of the invisible God and the brightness of his glory and the image of his substance, Who is everywhere by His first generation like an object that generates its similitude in the entire medium, is united by the grace of union to the individual of rational nature as the species is united with the bodily organ, so that through this union He may lead us back to the Father, as to the Fountain-head and Object. If, therefore, all knowable of things must generate a likeness of themselves, they manifestly proclaim that in them, as in mirrors, can be seen the eternal generation of the Word, the Image, and the Son, eternally emanating from God the Father.²⁷

Every created thing reflects in itself the Word from which it arose and which shines through it, and which at the same time enlightens the mind in beholding them, drawing the soul towards a contuition of their source:

For creatures are shadows, echoes, and pictures of that first, most powerful, most wise, and most perfect Principle, of that eternal Source, Light, Fullness, of that efficient, exemplary and ordering Art. They are the vestiges, images, and displays presented to us for the contuition of God, and the divinely given signs wherein we can see God.²⁸

Bonaventure proceeds to the third step in which the image of God is now discerned and contemplated within the soul.

²⁶ *Itinerarium* 2:1

²⁷ *Itinerarium* 2:7

²⁸ *Itinerarium* 2:11

The first two steps, by leading us to God through vestiges through which He shines forth in all creatures, have thereby led us to re-enter into ourselves, that is, into our mind, where the divine image shines forth.²⁹

Here, through reflection on the operations of the soul, the soul is perceived as an image of the Divine Trinity in a multitude of ways, but first of all through memory:

Enter into yourself, therefore and observe that your soul loves itself most fervently; that it could not love itself unless it knew itself, nor know itself unless it summoned itself to conscious memory, for we do not grasp a thing with our understanding unless it is present in our memory. Hence you can observe, not with the bodily eye, but with the eye of the mind, that your soul has three powers.³⁰

The mind is present to itself through self-recollection, unlike with any external object, and being present to itself it loves itself, since love is the principle of unity. Likewise, it cannot recall any external thing or any image in the mind without being present to itself. This is the power of memory, the three powers of which Bonaventure proceeds to explain:

In its first activity, the actual retention of all things in time—past, present, and future—the memory is an image of eternity, whose indivisible present extends itself to all times. From the second activity, it is evident that the memory is capable of being informed not only from the outside by phantasms but also from above, by receiving and having in itself simple forms that cannot enter through the doors of the senses, nor through sensible phantasms. From the third activity we hold that the memory has present in itself a changeless light in which it recalls changeless truths. And thus it is clear from the activities of the memory that the soul itself is an image of God and a similitude so present to itself and having Him so present to it that it actually grasps Him and potentially “is capable of possessing Him and of becoming a partaker in Him.”³¹

The first activity is clear enough, with memory an image of eternity. From this power it has the power of foresight towards the future as well as drawing upon the past.³² In this it has a primordial intuition of all time, past, present and future, or where the “indivisible present extends itself to all times”. The second activity concerns the recollection or recognition of axioms or principles which are not derived from sense perception but received “from above”. In the third activity the memory “has present in itself a changeless light in which it recalls changeless truths”. Bonaventure then goes through the various branches of learning which are natural to the mind, observing finally that:

All these branches of knowledge have certain and infallible laws as lights and beacons shining down into our mind from the eternal law. And thus our mind, enlightened and

²⁹ *Itinerarium* 3:1

³⁰ *Itinerarium* 3:1

³¹ *Itinerarium* 3:2 The quotation is from St Augustine *On the Trinity* 8, 11

³² For a rich discussion of St Augustine’s understanding of time and eternity see Paul Ricoeur *Time and Narrative* Vol. 1 Chapter 1.

overflowed by so much brightness, unless it is blind, can be guided through itself to contemplate that eternal Light. And, in truth, the consideration of this Light's irradiation raises up in admiration the wise, but on the contrary, the unwise, who do not believe so that they may understand, it leads to confusion. Hence is fulfilled the prophecy: *Thou enlightenest wonderfully from the everlasting hills. All the foolish of heart were troubled.*³³

It is perceiving these infallible or eternal laws through the various branches of knowledge that illuminates the mind, rather than the branches of knowledge as such. Every kind of knowledge is seen to point upward beyond itself to what is eternal, and this is what is to be contemplated by the wise in wonder and admiration. In this way the branches of knowledge become "beacons shining down into our mind from the eternal law". There is a deep-rooted medieval psychology involved here. The mind is not a solitary objective observer of all things, such as the Cartesian self. Rather it is brought to itself through the mediation of three 'lights': the five senses, recollection through memory, and illumination of 'eternal things' from above itself. It is by nature oriented towards the highest truth, and created nature was formed in order to be known by the mind.

Here Bonaventure shares with Aquinas the understanding that the human mind is created to be the 'receptacle' of God's work, the terminus in which created things are completed and returned to their source in God.³⁴ Even in the created order itself all things exist to be known. This is one reason why man was the last creature to be created in Genesis. Part of the journey or ascent towards truth involves coming to know the nature of the mind and its true place in the order of things. This is the real basis of a theological anthropology. Ultimately, the soul has self-knowledge only through rising to mystical union with God, the beginning and end of all things.

This brings Bonaventure to the fourth step. Here, through contemplating the soul's likeness to the image of God, through the Divine Trinity, it must now be transformed by the *presence* of the Word within it, and acquire the three theological virtues, faith, hope, and charity. This work is accomplished through meditation on the Scriptures.

Thus it is that, no matter how enlightened one may be by the light coming from nature and from acquired knowledge, he cannot enter into himself to delight in the Lord except through the mediation of Christ, Who says, *I am the door. If anyone enter by me he shall be safe, and shall go in and out, and shall find pastures.*³⁵

Up to this point the journey of the mind to God has been conducted through the diligence and steadfastness of the pilgrim, but now the mind must be guided by the Creative Word itself and perfected through grace. This represents a step from natural knowledge and metaphysical knowledge to theological knowledge.

³³ *Itinerarium* 3:7

³⁴ For a full discussion of the relation of human knowing to the truth of created things in Aquinas see Josef Pieper, *Living the Truth* (Ignatius Press, 1989)

³⁵ *Itinerarium* 4:2. The biblical reference is John 10, 9.

The image of our soul, therefore, must be clothed over with the three theological virtues, by which the soul is purified, enlightened, and perfected. In this way the image is reformed and made conformable to the heavenly Jerusalem.³⁶

The fourth step is also a step from the way of knowledge to the way of affection or love or longing. This leads to the soul's recovery of her spiritual senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch.

When the soul longs with hope to receive the inspired Word, she recovers, because of her desire and affection, the spiritual sense of smell. When she embraces with love the Incarnate Word, inasmuch as she receives delight from Him and passes over to Him in ecstatic love, she recovers her sense of taste and touch. Having recovered the spiritual senses, the soul now sees, hears, smells, tastes, and embraces her beloved, and can sing as a bride the *Canticle of Canticles*, which was composed for the exercise of contemplation proper to the fourth step.³⁷

It is significant here that Bonaventure refers to the *Canticle of Canticles*, the classic scriptural text for the path of ecstatic love, an allegorical mystical song which can be understood only by a mind purified and with the spiritual senses awakened. Also we see the influence of St Bernard of Clairvaux here, the master of the affective way and the great expositor of the *Canticle of Canticles*. Perhaps it is also worth remarking that Bonaventure takes a slightly different direction from Thomas Aquinas here, drawing more heavily on the Platonic tradition that preceded the discovery of Aristotle at that time. It is important to appreciate that the allegorical interpretation of the *Canticle of Canticles* in no way demeaned the ordinary love between man and woman. All forms of love, spiritually understood, have their origin in the soul's love of God, since the love of God is love as such, the ground and spring of every other kind of love. On the contrary, the love between man and woman is an image of divine love and shares in that love, just as created nature is an image of the Creator and filled with the presence of the Creator through the Word. Spiritually speaking, all things reveal that One Truth which is their source and their end. This is the kind of understanding that belongs to the fourth step.

It is at this step, where the interior senses have been restored to see what is most beautiful, to hear what is most harmonious, to smell what is most fragrant, to taste what is most sweet, and to embrace what is most delightful, that the soul is prepared for spiritual transports through devotion, admiration, and exultation, corresponding to the three exclamations uttered in the *Canticle of Canticles*.³⁸

As the mind is reformed it becomes a temple for God to dwell in:

Filled with all these intellectual lights, our mind like the house of God is inhabited by Divine Wisdom; it is made a daughter, a spouse, and a friend of God; it is made a member, a sister,

³⁶ *Itinerarium* 4:3

³⁷ *Itinerarium* 4:3

³⁸ *Itinerarium* 4:3

a co-heir of Christ the Head; it is made the temple of the Holy Spirit, faith laying the foundation, hope building it up, and sanctity of soul and body dedicating it to God.³⁹

This pure or transformed state of the mind leads to the fifth step, where Bonaventure brings us to the contemplation of Being Itself, which then leads to the sixth and final step, the contemplation of the Good Itself. While drawing upon high metaphysical speculation in this fifth step, Bonaventure points to the purely spiritual work at this level by relating Being to the Old Testament and the Good to the New Testament. This shows how even his metaphysical speculations remain grounded in and illuminated by Scripture:

The former looks especially to the Old Testament, which proclaims chiefly the unity of the divine essence. Hence it was said to Moses, *I am Who am*. The latter looks to the New Testament, which determines the plurality of the Divine Persons by baptising in *the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*.⁴⁰

In a short compass Bonaventure manages to expound the essence of the contemplation of Being Itself. Since a great deal of modern philosophical thought has been given to the question of Being, it is worth quoting Bonaventure's exposition in full:

He, therefore, who wishes to contemplate the invisible things of God in relation to the unity of His essence should fix the attention of his soul on Being Itself and see that Being Itself is so absolutely certain that it cannot be thought not to be, because the most pure Being Itself does not come to our mind except in full flight from non-being, as also the absolute nothing does not, except in full flight from being. Just as, therefore, complete nothingness contains nothing of being or of its attributes, so contrariwise, being itself contains nothing of non-being, either in act or in potency, in objective truth or in our estimate of it. But since non-being is the privation of being, it does not come into the intellect except by means of being. Being, however, does not come to us by means of something else, because everything that is grasped by the intellect is grasped either as non-being, or as being in potency, or as being in act. If, therefore, non-being cannot be grasped except through being, and if being in potency cannot be understood except through being in actuality, and if being designates the pure actuality of being, then being is that which first comes into the intellect, and this being is that which is pure act. But this being is not particular being, which is a limited being, since it is mixed with potentiality; nor is it analogous being, for that has the least of act because it least exists. It remains, therefore, that the being which we are considering is the Divine Being.⁴¹

The important point to grasp here is that it is Being Itself that “comes first into the intellect”. Without the apprehension of Being as such, the mind can neither be present to itself nor ponder any perception or thought. It is Being as such that grants the mind to itself and lies at the foundation of all its powers. It is Being as such that enables it to apprehend “particular being”, and therefore the mind's own particular being. Also, it is only through the apprehension of

³⁹ *Itinerarium* 4:8

⁴⁰ *Itinerarium* 5:2

⁴¹ *Itinerarium* 5:3

Being as such that non-being can be thought, and this can be thought only as the privation of being. Non-being does not precede Being. Nevertheless, although Being Itself is given and enables all other apprehension, including self-recollection, it is most easily missed and requires deep consideration:

Strange, then, is the blindness of the intellect which does not consider that which it sees before all others and without which it can recognise nothing. But just as the eye, intent on the various differences of colour, does not see the light through which it sees other things, or if it does see, does not notice it, so our mind's eye, intent on particular and universal beings, does not notice that being which is beyond all categories, even though it comes first to the mind, and through it, all other things.⁴²

It is worth noting here how the metaphysical contemplation of Being depends upon the mind's capacity for self-reflection and what it receives prior to any thought or perception. Although Bonaventure draws many inferences in the passage quoted, these inferences do not deduce Being as a logical conclusion, but rather the inferences follow from the pre-apprehension of Being Itself. Being cannot be an object of proof or logical deduction. It is the already given ground of any mode of thought whatsoever. So, rather than seeking some adequate description or definition of Being, since it is "beyond all categories", at the fifth step Bonaventure is leading the mind to contemplate and bear witness to the immediate presence of Being Itself. And so the following can be observed:

Behold, if you can, this most pure Being and you will find that it cannot be thought of as a being which is received from something else. Hence, it must necessarily be thought of as absolutely first, since it cannot come into existence from nothing or from something else. For what else exists of itself if this very being is not through and by itself?⁴³

Again, as with ancient and medieval thought generally, the first *given* upon which all else depends is the *highest* that can be known, from which all other modes of being *descend* hierarchically. The world is not built upwards from inert, unintelligent matter, but downwards from the most fully actual, most complete, unified, and self-originating. So, although Bonaventure has led the mind upwards from outward perception in the beginning, he has brought it to the realisation of what was always first, yet can only be contemplated with the mind purified through the theological virtues. Only the virtuous soul has the clarity and steadfastness of vision to behold the highest, primary truth. It is in this way that metaphysics, which is known through reason, becomes a steppingstone from which the mind can reach contemplation of divine or eternal things as living reality. Contemplation of the concept gives way to reception of the actuality itself.

This process of ascending to the first or primary is called a *reductio*, in which the mind traces back all things to God. It is obviously the reverse of modern material reductionism.

⁴² *Itinerarium* 5:4

⁴³ *Itinerarium* 5:5

Bonaventure demonstrates this in a very brief and compact work entitled *De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam*, which opens with this simple summary:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the father of Lights, says James in the first chapter of his epistle. These words of Sacred Scripture not only indicate the source of all illumination but they likewise point out the generous flow of manifold rays which issue from the Fount of light. Notwithstanding the fact that every illumination of knowledge is within, still we can with reason distinguish what we may call the *external* light, or light of mechanical art; the *lower* light, or the light of sense perception; the *inner* light, or the light of philosophical knowledge; and the *higher* light, or the light of grace and of Sacred Scripture. The first light illumines in regard to structure of *artifacts*; the second, in regard to *natural forms*; the third, in regard to *intellectual truth*; the fourth and last, in regard to *saving truth*.⁴⁴

It is clear from this that the higher each step the mind ascends, the more inclusive the knowledge it is illuminated by. The higher contains the lower, while the lower has a trace of the higher informing it and, so to speak, inviting the reason to ascend to the next level. It is the highest that the mind by nature seeks and which leads it to seek any knowledge at all. Just as it has a intuition of Being Itself prior to any other knowledge, so likewise it already loves Truth Itself prior to any understanding.

Returning to the *Itinerarium* we come now to the sixth step, where the contemplation of Being Itself leads to the realisation that it is *good*. Just as with Being Itself, the Good “cannot be thought of as not existing. But the Good cannot be rightly thought of unless it is thought of as triune and one”.⁴⁵ This is because the Good is self-diffusive, going out of itself and being productive and returning again to itself:

For good is said to be self-diffusive, and therefore the highest good is most self-diffusive. But such highest diffusion cannot be other than actual and intrinsic, substantial and hypostatic, natural and voluntary, free and necessary, unfailing and perfect. Unless there were in the highest good from all eternity an active and consubstantial production, and a hypostasis of equal nobility, such as is found in producing by way of generation and spiration - and this in such a way that what is of the eternal principle is also eternally of the co-principle - so that there is the loved and the beloved, the generated and the spirated, that is, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, that is to say, unless these were present, there would not be found the highest good here, because it would not be supremely self-diffusive. For the diffusion that occurred in time in the creation of the world is no more than a pivot or point in comparison with the immense sweep of the eternal goodness.⁴⁶

In contemplating the self-diffusive nature of the Good and its infinite communicability, then the Blessed Trinity Itself can be contemplated:

⁴⁴ *De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam*, 1

⁴⁵ *Itinerarium* 6:2

⁴⁶ *Itinerarium* 6:2

By reason of Their supreme goodness, the three Persons must necessarily have supreme communicability; by reason of that, supreme consubstantiality; and by reason of supreme consubstantiality, They must have supreme conformability. Then by reason of all these, They must have supreme coequality, and hence supreme coeternity. Finally, from all the foregoing taken together, They must have supreme mutual intimacy, by which one Person is necessarily in the other by reason of Their supreme interpenetration, and one acts with the other in absolute in-division of the substance, power, and activity of the Most Blessed Trinity Itself.⁴⁷

Bonaventure elaborates extensively in the Blessed Trinity here, which is too vast for us to summarise. What is important, however, is that it is the consideration of the Good that necessitates an understanding of the triune nature of God. It is the Divine Trinity that expresses or articulates the mystery of the absolute unity or Oneness of God. This contemplation leads to a transformation of the understanding in which it sees man made in the image of God:

In this contemplation consists the perfect illumination of the mind, when, as it were, on the sixth day it sees man made to the image of God. For if an image is an expressed likeness, then when our mind contemplates in Christ the Son of God, Who is by nature the image of the invisible God, our humanity so wonderfully exalted, so ineffably united, and when at the same time it sees united the first and the last, the highest and the lowest, the circumference and the centre, the *Alpha* and the *Omega*, the caused and the cause, the Creator and the creature, that is, *the book written within and without*, it has already reached something perfect. Now it arrives at the perfection of its illuminations on the sixth step, as with God on the sixth day. And now nothing further remains but the day of rest on which through transports of mind the penetrating power of the human mind *rests from all the work that it has done*.⁴⁸

And so the journey of the mind into God comes to rest in the same manner as God came to rest on the seventh day of creation. The journey towards mystical union is prefigured in the six days of creation. In this way the inner meaning of the Scriptures serves to lead the mind to discern created things in their true light, as vestiges of the Blessed Trinity, and the mind as illuminated by natural philosophy, and led to contemplate eternal truths which come to it from above itself, and thence to contemplate itself, and all mankind, as made in the image of God.

It remains to see if there is for Bonaventure a parallel between this final mystical rest of the human soul and the final rest of the world. Having derived a structure of mystical ascent from the six days of creation, does some similar structure inform history or the unfolding of the universe? In the *Collations of the Six Days* Bonaventure, following a scheme found in St Augustine, yet coloured by Joachim, seeks to discern the six ages of the world through the Prophets and the New Testament. But this is not expressed systematically and the best attempt to unravel it is Joseph Ratzinger's *The Theology of History in Bonaventure*.⁴⁹ However, in the Breviloquium we do have a description of the end of the world which does correspond with the

⁴⁷ *Itinerarium* 6:2

⁴⁸ *Itinerarium* 6:7

⁴⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in Bonaventure* (Franciscan Herald Press, 1971)

mysticism of the *Itinerarium* where he describes how the world will be consumed in fire. This, however, he sees as a cleansing process, most especially within the souls of humankind. One senses he is not speaking literally, but calling upon the symbolic or allegoric sense of Scripture. He then proceeds to describe a renewal of the world:

Furthermore, this world ought to be renewed once humankind is renewed. Now, a thing cannot be recast into a new form unless it has lost the old, and is, in a certain way, prepared through receiving a new disposition. Now fire has the greatest power to remove the external form, and also a refining power akin to heavenly nature. Thus both the cleansing and the renovation of the world must come about through fire; of this double effect, one aspect will precede and the other will follow the coming of the Judge. Moreover, true renovation leads to a newness that is no longer liable to aging, and such an incorruptible newness no creature can bestow. Therefore, although in this cleansing and renovation, fire acts partly through natural powers, setting aflame, purging, vaporizing, and refining, there must be present with these, another power higher than nature: a power by whose command the conflagration is initiated, and by which power its termination nevertheless will be achieved.⁵⁰

And further on:

The motion of the heavenly bodies must cease and come to rest; likewise, the transmutations of the elements will come to an end, and consequently the process of generation in animals and plants. For since all these creatures were ordained toward the more noble form, the rational soul, once souls have achieved their final state of rest, all other things must come to completion and rest.⁵¹

And finally, perhaps the most illuminating passage:

Vegetative and sensitive beings do not possess the power of perpetual life and eternal duration that is reserved for the higher state, and so their whole substance will be consumed [in the fire]. However, they will be preserved as ideas; and in a certain manner they will survive also in their likeness, humankind, who is kin to creatures of every species. And so one can say that *all things* will be *made new* and, in a certain sense, rewarded in the renovation and glorification of humanity.⁵²

This is perfectly orthodox, with a meaning intended to resonate with the apocalyptic visions of the Bible. Yet, Bonaventure clearly sees, not so much a final Judgement in which some will be saved and some damned, but rather a transformation of *all things* into their original form or Idea, or a *spiritualisation* of material things into a new mode of life. Earlier we observed that in its task of coming to know the creatures of the world the human mind in some sense receives them as their terminus. Just as the mind is oriented *to know*, so creatures are oriented *to be known*, even as Adam gave names to the first creatures that they might be known. Bonaventure says “all these creatures were ordained toward the more noble form”, thus tracing an ascending

⁵⁰ *Breviloquium* VII, 4, 6

⁵¹ *Breviloquium* VII, 4, 7

⁵² *Breviloquium* VII, 4, 7

teleological hierarchy in the order of creatures towards the noblest form, which is soul. In the *Reductione* he writes “the natural tendency in matter is so ordained toward intellectual causes that the generation is in no way perfect unless the rational soul be united to the material body”.⁵³ This suggests that all creatures strive to become soul, and if that can be said, then their place and work as *vestiges* and *footprints* of God takes on new significance. They become part of the unfolding sacred narrative of the creation along with humankind. History, in its essentially Christian sense, becomes an ascent towards God, in the same manner as the spiritual life of the mystic.

These speculations lead us back to our earlier consideration of ‘narrative time’ which connects events through their meaning rather than in static moments of secular time. In his book *Heavenly Participation* Hans Boersma draws our attention to the forgotten tradition of ‘sacramental time’ in which events in secular time take on meaning in eschatological time. He cites Yves M.-J. Congar who writes:

[w]hen the living God himself is the agent of historical events – not just by his general providence, but acting to constitute another element in salvation history, a “mystery” – he communicates to acts which take place in time certain possibilities and a density which surpasses the conditions of earthly time. They are inserted into another sphere of existence, the eschatological order, which has for its principle the Holy Spirit.⁵⁴

Boersma observes that our age has lost the ancient sense of time present in Plato and St Augustine; “In nominalist fashion, we tend to look at time as a simple succession of distinct moments, unrelated to one another”. He cites Charles Taylor: “We have constructed an environment in which we live a uniform, univocal secular time, which we try to measure and control in order to get things done”.⁵⁵ It is this same limited “uniform, univocal, secular time” that has broken our sense of providence and also our connection with the various symbolic levels of meaning in Scripture. We no longer read Scripture as speaking from a grasp of all things from the perspective of eternity, a mode of speaking that can only be uttered symbolically, and where every event bears witness to a sacred unfolding of time in which all things are being called and gathered into spiritual union. For the modern age time has no compass.

Bonaventure stands in the last stages of the blossoming of medieval scholasticism where the language of theology still communicated across the boundaries of symbolic and rational understanding, and where a divine presence was felt to pervade all realms of existence and all disciplines. This communication across different modes of knowledge was possible because thought and speculation took its bearing from a sense of the whole of reality, thinking from the totality of things downwards to particulars. This is why Bonaventure says that the first knowledge in the soul is of Being Itself. Likewise there is an intuitive knowledge of the Good as the ordering principle of nature or the universe. Thought, enquiry, reflection, speculation,

⁵³ *Reductione* 20

⁵⁴ Quoted from Yves M.-J. Congar’s *Tradition and Tradition*, by Hans Boersma *Heavenly Participation*, p. 125

⁵⁵ Quoted from Charles Taylor *A Secular Age*, p. 59 by Hans Boersma *Heavenly Participation*, p. 126

and meditation all aim at discerning the way this primordial knowledge extends into and orders of nature and the human community. Thus each discipline is seen as grounded in the whole and related to every other discipline. And time itself was apprehended as comprehending all time, present, past, and future, and with a perfect form originating in eternity and returning transformed to eternity.

The communication across the realms of theology and reason was gentle, with each honouring the other and neither seeking to conflate both into itself. Reason works by proportion and measure, while theology works in symbols of unbounded meaning. This mutual relation is clearly demonstrated in Bonaventure's six steps in the journey of the mind to God. It would seem that the mystery of sacred time stands in a similar relation to secular time, one to be understood theologically and the other rationally, with neither being conflated into the other. That was the error Bonaventure sought to overcome in Joachim. Just as mystical union with God is known only through union, so likewise sacred time is known only through participation in it, and no amount of conjecture can encompass it from outside. And of the final consummation of all things we can only fall back on Scripture: "But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father". (Mark 13:22)

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