

SIMPLY  
BONAVENTURE



Ilia Delio, O.S.F.

# SIMPLY BONAVENTURE

An Introduction to His Life,  
Thought, and Writing



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In loving memory of my father  
who has returned to God



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I undertook this project as part of my sabbatical at the Washington Theological Union. Anticipating the onerous task of research and writing, I soon found myself caught up in the deep intertwining of theology and spirituality that is unique to Bonaventure. What began as work, therefore, was transformed into a spiritual journey. Bonaventure became my spiritual guide and my sabbatical became a retreat on the journey to God. It is my hope that all those who read *Simply Bonaventure* will also embark on this wonderful journey, for Bonaventure gets to the heart of what it means to be truly human and loved by God.



## Introduction

Approximately seven years ago I was standing in the office of Ewert Cousins at Fordham University. Anyone who has visited Professor Cousins's office is immediately struck by the periphery of books, dissertations and papers lining the walls. At one point, Ewert climbed over a pile of books and reached into his filing cabinet pulling out a manuscript that he had worked on but never completed. He handed it to me and I was impressed by the title, "The Essential Bonaventure." Since that time I have mulled over the idea of "The Essential Bonaventure" hoping one day that I could complete the manuscript.

The present book, *Simply Bonaventure*, is an offshoot of that initial idea. It is somewhat different in structure and scope from that which Professor Cousins had originally intended. My reasons for this book are several. First, the growing interest in Bonaventure's theology today among a variety of people calls for a less technical and more general approach to his theology. Bonaventure's scholastic "style," his language, rich with symbolism and the numerical patterning of his ideas, all make for difficult reading to the untrained eye. The complex medieval thought patterns that characterize Bonaventure's writings can be either intimidating and, or, frustrating, and the question is often asked, "what is he *really* saying?" Despite the difficulties of his writings, Bonaventure's theological system is a profound and unique synthesis complete with its own metaphysics, and can provide a meaningful substrate to contemporary Christian life. In order to open the doors of his theology to others, however, it must become "user friendly." This book is written as an invitation to enter into his world.

Although it is somewhat presumptuous to call this book *Simply Bonaventure* in light of the complexity of Bonaventure's

thought, I believe the *essence* of his thought is contained in a simple formula that Bonaventure himself professed: “This is our entire metaphysics: emanation, exemplarity, and consummation, that is, to be illumined by rays of spiritual light and to return to the Most High.”<sup>1</sup> Translating this into more contemporary terms Bonaventure was ultimately concerned with three questions: 1) Where have we come from? 2) What are we doing here? 3) Where are we going? Rather than approaching these as open-ended questions, however, Bonaventure began with the conviction of faith in God who has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. “Unless we are able to view things in terms of how they originate, how they are to be reduced to their end, and how God shines forth in them, we will not be able to understand.”<sup>2</sup> Always searching for the ultimate ground of truth, he came to perceive the fullness of truth in Jesus Christ. Thus, he indicated, if we want to know the ground of our being, the purpose of our existence and the goal to which we are directed, we must come to know Christ who is the center of our lives and our universe.

To explore the world of this profound theologian, I have divided the book into three main sections: Bonaventure’s life, thought, and writings. With regard to his life, there is little that can be said. Although Bonaventure was a major public figure for most of his life, the lack of an official biography or unbiased eyewitness account(s) of his life makes it difficult to construct an accurate portrait of this theologian and saint. However, it is reasonable to say that something of the person shines through in his writings. Thus, as more of Bonaventure’s writings come to the fore, so too does this mystic and leader become more readily “visible.”

The area I have concentrated on in this book is Bonaventure’s thought. I place the emphasis on *thought* rather than *theology* or *writings* because my attempt here is to answer the question, “what is Bonaventure *really* saying?” Etienne Gilson once remarked that Bonaventure’s theology is of such remarkable harmony and unity that one either sees the whole or one sees nothing at all. No one part can be extracted in

isolation from the whole.<sup>3</sup> In light of Gilson's remark, I have attempted an overall synthesis of Bonaventure's thought based on his own metaphysical structure of emanation, exemplarity, and consummation.

The pattern of Bonaventure's thought is "circular"—we come from God, we exist in relation to God and we are to return to God.<sup>4</sup> The basis of this "circle" is the Trinity in which the Father who is the fountain-fullness of goodness communicates goodness to the Son who, in turn, loves the Father in the Spirit. For Bonaventure, God is an infinite primordial mystery of self-communicative love. Just as the Father is the source and goal of the immanent emanations of the Trinity, so too the Father is the source and goal of all created reality. Thus, everything flows from the Father (*emanation*) and ultimately returns to the Father (*consummation*). Bonaventure frequently used the image of water to describe the God of overflowing love as a vast and living fountain of water.<sup>5</sup> As Zachary Hayes writes:

Flowing from that fountain as something willed and loved by God is the immense river of creation. The world of nature is a vast expression of a loving will. Such a world is not one-dimensional, but like water, it has many qualities and dimensions. Like the water of the ocean, the world has an overwhelming fullness as it flows from the depths of God. Like the ocean, it is deep and contains many levels of meaning. Like the water of a river, the world flows in such fluidity and richness that it cannot be contained in any one form or category. And as—according to *Ecclesiastes* 1:7—rivers return to their place of origin, so the river of creation circles back on its place of origin. Emanation is simultaneously a movement toward the return or reduction of creation to God. Created existence, therefore, is a dynamic reality, directed in its inner core to a fulfillment and completion which is to be the mysterious fruit of its history.<sup>6</sup>

The image of life as a flowing fountain or stream emanating from the mouth of God imparts a dynamic image to God and creation. For Bonaventure, God is not the disinterested unmoved mover who has nothing in common with creation. Rather, God is the infinite dynamic fountain-fullness of self-communicative love who, by the very nature of being love, is at once Most High and intimately related to us (*altissime et piissime*).<sup>7</sup> God is the source of our lives and the goal to which we are directed. With this in mind, I have arranged the chapters so that they follow the pattern of emanation, exemplarity and consummation (reduction). Since the basis of emanation is the Trinity I begin with the mystery of divine, infinite, self-diffusive goodness that undergirds the Trinity. By understanding the Trinity and the relationships of the divine persons we come to a more profound understanding of creation and, within creation, humanity. The Trinity provides a “blueprint” for creation since the relationship between the Father and Son/Word, united in the Spirit, is the ground of all other relationships. The triad of Trinity—creation—humanity manifests the dynamism of God’s self-communicative love whereby creation and humanity spiral forth from the overflowing goodness of God.

The question of why we exist finds meaning on three different but interrelated levels: first, in the mirror of creation, second, in the creation of the human person as image of God and, ultimately, in the Incarnation. Bonaventure offers a rich anthropology that is grounded in a cosmic Christology. His theology of Incarnation is much closer to the cosmic Christology of the Greek Fathers than to Anselm’s doctrine of satisfaction, and he highlights the Incarnation as both a work of redemption and cosmic completion. Understanding the primary reason for the Incarnation in terms of cosmic completion reflects the profound role the human person has in creation, since the human person alone is created in a particular way, congruent to the Word of God. The human person, therefore, is structured to the mystery of Christ who is the divine-temporal exemplar. Bonaventure places a special

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emphasis on devotion to the humanity of Christ whereby imitation of Christ is integral to the journey to God. Through imitation of Christ, the human person participates in the building up of the body of Christ which in Bonaventure's view undergirds the reduction or leading back of all things to God. The chapters on Incarnation, Soul's Journey and Imitation of Christ, therefore, form a second triad whereby conformity to Christ leads one into the heart of God. It is in union with Christ that one arrives at true contemplation which may be described as a transcendence in love. At this final stage of the journey, one enters into the mystery of the Father whereby silence and love prevail. Bonaventure sees the fruits of contemplation—wisdom, peace and ecstatic love—manifested in the desire for martyrdom which, in his view, can usher in the final age of historical peace. Thus, the last few chapters of this section explore the centrality of Christ in the Christian life, the road to contemplation and the attainment of peace.

The final chapter, "Reductio," explores how and why all things must lead back to God. The key to reduction according to Bonaventure lies in the human person created in the image of God. In a sense the new birth of creation and the destiny of history are contingent on the freedom of the human person. Bonaventure realized that while all things come from God and in some way reflect God, it is the human person alone who is created in the divine image and can attain a true relationship with God. The capacity of the human person for God, however, is not a matter for the individual alone. In Bonaventure's view, one's relationship with God influences the destiny of creation and the consummation of history. Our lives not only make a difference but a cosmic difference. While the human person is capable of knowing and loving God, such a capacity is grounded in freedom. God has revealed the way, the truth and the life in Christ but we must have the desire to see. For Bonaventure, the light to see is already within us but

we must turn toward this light, and the very act of turning is itself a decision made in freedom and in response to grace.

Although Bonaventure's thought must be explored from the point of theology, I have tried at the same time to highlight the relevancy of his thought for contemporary Christian life. It is perhaps a methodological error to extract a medieval theologian's ideas and apply them to the twenty-first century; however, I am not strictly "splicing and inserting." While I am aware that Bonaventure's Ptolemaic universe was vastly different from our evolutionary one, I am also fairly certain that humanity has not changed in the last eight hundred years. The essential questions that Bonaventure raised in the thirteenth century are still relevant to us in the twenty-first century, namely, What is our origin? What is our purpose? And to where are we going? Perhaps, most importantly as Christians in a global world, the critical question for us today concerns the meaning and purpose of Jesus Christ. While Bonaventure's theology does not provide immediate answers, his metaphysical system with Christ as center provides a rich integral synthesis of God, humanity and creation that can impart vital meaning and hope to contemporary Christian life.

The last section is a brief introduction to Bonaventure's writings. Excerpts from the writings reveal the voices he assumed throughout his lifetime: theologian-scholar, leader-pastor, defender of the faith. The strictly theological works are formal scholastic treatments of theological questions written at the University of Paris and are more objective and "scientific" in nature. Bonaventure's spiritual writings, including his more prescriptive writings, were composed during his tenure as Minister General of the Franciscan Order and reflect his various roles as brother-friar, seeker of God, spiritual director and religious leader. These writings, in particular, disclose Bonaventure's mystical spirit and his passionate love of God revealed in Christ crucified in whom he saw the mystery of God and creation united. A final series of works known as "lectures" (*collationes*) complete the corpus of Bonaventure's works. These were delivered to the faculty and



students at the University of Paris at a time when Latin Aristotelianism was threatening to uproot Christian doctrine. Bonaventure's lectures stand firm on the conviction of faith in Jesus Christ and reinforce the primacy of theology in the face of philosophical inquiry. Taken in concert, Bonaventure's writings (and we might add the staggering number of these works) reveal a fertile mind, a passionate heart, a generous spirit and a consuming passion for truth.

Despite his demanding role as Minister General of the Franciscan Order for almost a third of his life, Bonaventure maintained a steady gaze on the mystery of God revealed in Christ and him crucified. Whether at the University, in the friary, in the pulpit or in the parlor of the Poor Clare nuns, Bonaventure never ceased to pursue the questions of origin, purpose and destiny. In his view, unless we know where we come from we cannot return. In our age where meaning and purpose of human existence is becoming increasingly vague, and the quest for human identity shows the mark of desperation, Bonaventure offers a profound system of thought that can help redefine the boundaries of what it means to be human and Christian. It is, indeed, a search and a journey that begins with desire and prayer and spirals through the complexities of our lives, as we seek to find God at the center of our existence. Bonaventure reassures us that on this journey God is not only with us but in us, leading us in light despite the sense of ever present darkness. To recognize God within us is to let go in freedom—of clinging to that which is not God—and to embrace in love that which is God even in the midst of suffering humanity. In the end, we cannot understand the mystery of God within us and in our world; we can only yield to this mystery in love. Then, and only then, however, do we see the face of God and live, for to yield in love is to return to the point from which we began. And in this return we discover the truth of who we are created to be and the truth of the world in all its beauty.

Ilia Delio, O.S.F.

## Notes

1. Bonaventure, *Collationes in Hexaëmeron* (hereafter *Hex.*) 1.17 (V, 332). “[Hoc est medium *metaphysicum* reducens], et haec est tota nostra metaphysica: de emanatione, de exemplaritate, de consummatione, scilicet illuminari per radios spirituales et reduci ad summum.” All Bonaventure’s works cited in this volume are from the critical edition, *Doctoris Seraphici S. Bonaventurase opera omnia*. 10 Volumes, in folio. (Ad Claras Aquas, Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1882–1902). Latin texts are indicated by volume and page number in parentheses.

2. *Hex.* 3.2 (V, 343). “Nisi enim quis possit considerare de rebus, qualiter originantur, qualiter in finem reducuntur, et qualiter in eis refulget Deus; intelligentiam habere non potest.”

3. Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of Saint Bonaventure*, trans. Illyd Trethowan and F. J. Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1938), 430.

4. Although the idea of a metaphysical circle is a Hellenistic concept which underscores an eternal world, Bonaventure did not appropriate the image of the circle in this manner. Rather, he describes the “circle of life” within the linear direction of history. The circle expresses a Christian concept of creation as a temporal-historical reality. Because God, who is creator, creates out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), the world has a definite beginning (from God) and end in which everything attains its final consummation in God. As he states in his disputed questions on evangelical perfection: “Omega revolvit ad alpha.” See Bonaventure, *Questiones disputatae de perfectione evangelica* (hereafter *Perf. ev.*) q. 2, a. 2.20 (V, 148).

5. Bonaventure, *I Commentarius in Libros Sententiarum* (hereafter *Sent.*) proem. (I, 1–6); idem, *Breviloquium* (hereafter *Brev.*) prol. 1 (V, 203).

6. Zachary Hayes, *The Hidden Center: Spirituality and Speculative Christology in St. Bonaventure* (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1992), 13.

7. *Brev.* 1.2 (V, 211).