

[1964. In *Encyclopedia of Christianity*. Edwin A. Palmer, ed. Wilmington, Delaware: National Foundation for Christian Education.]

**BONAVENTURA**, (1221-1274), RC Franciscan theologian. His family name was John Fidanza. He became a Franciscan (1243), studied at Paris under Alexander of Hales, and taught there. In 1257 he became the general of the Franciscan order and defended it against attacks from the Paris university. He was mainly responsible for the election of Pope Gregory X (1271), who in 1273 made him the Cardinal Bishop of Albano. He died during the Council of Lyons, where he warmly advocated the reunion of the East and West. He was canonized in 1482.

The Dominicans, whose greatest thinker was Thomas Aquinas, stressed doctrine and Aristotelian speculation first; devotion and spirituality second. The Franciscans, however, put devotion first and Augustinian doctrine and philosophy second. Covering though it does the major points of philosophy, the teaching of Bonaventura, a Franciscan, is indicated by the title of his best-known work, *Itinerary of the Soul to God*. This itinerary consists of three main stages. The lowest and initial stage is that of Christian faith, by which we possess an imperfect but certain knowledge of God. Next is the stage of reason and philosophy, equally a work of grace. Then finally there will be the blessedness of intellectual intuition and contemplation in heaven.

To Bonaventura, then, philosophy is a religious activity that carries us toward God, to see whom is the chief end of man, for no finite object satisfies the desire for knowledge. The study of nature, accordingly, is not to be undertaken for its own sake. The things of this world are to God what language is to us. God created them for the purpose of self-expression, and as such they are to be understood only as signs and symbols, images and shadows, vestiges and evidences of God.

This theme allows Bonaventura to make statements that seemingly accord with the cosmological argument for God's existence. The existence of any finite thing, he says, requires a first self-sufficient Being. But actually his thought never went further than admitting sensible things to be evidences of God.

Bonaventura believed that in the human soul God is seen more clearly than in the rest of nature. To look at external nature we must, as it were, turn our backs on God and see His shadow; but to seek God in our own soul is like facing God and seeing His image. Less pictorially, our intellectual operations, as in Augustine, all involve God. Especially the necessity and immutability of the law of contradiction, which cannot be empirically derived, is an instance of the light that lights every man who comes into the world. Sensation is never necessary for a knowledge of God because this knowledge is not an Aristotelian abstraction from sensible things. The existence of God, or, better, God Himself, is an immediate, illuminating truth innate in man. Knowledge is a union of our intellect with the eternal

unchangeable Truth itself. At the same time, this knowledge is partial and finite, appropriate to a created reason.

Thus, in opposition to the cosmological argument of Aristotle and Thomas, Bonaventura inclines to the ontological argument of Anselm. In so doing he avoids Kant's later criticism because he does not pass illicitly from a bare idea to actual being. God Himself is present to our minds, and our idea is precisely God's mode of being present.

This view runs the risk of the heresy of ontologism, later pursued consistently by Malebranche. To avoid this, Bonaventura denies that we can in this life directly contemplate God. Our knowledge is like that seen through a mirror darkly. We indeed see the whole object, but we see it vaguely. At the same time, to preserve a real knowledge of God to the finite human mind, when both finitude and sin might seem to make real knowledge impossible, Bonaventura uses a striking comparison: if mountains gave us the strength to carry them, we could carry a large mountain more easily than a small one. Similarly, God in His immensity enables our intellect to know Him — and all the more so, since the object known, God, is not an exterior object to be attained by our mind's ranging afar, but an interior object immediately present.

This Augustinianism demands a Platonic metaphysics, and Bonaventura forcefully asserts the existence of the world of Ideas. But the Platonism is purged of all pantheistic tendencies. The world of Ideas or Divine Mind is not an inferior to the supreme One, as in Plotinus, nor an intermediate being between God and the visible world. This world of Ideas is not a creature, but a Son, a Word, and very God. Further, to maintain the absolute distinctness of the Creator from the creature, Bonaventura asserts that God is expressed completely only in the Ideas and denies that the physical world can be deduced from the Divine Mind even on the ground that God naturally would create the best of all possible worlds. God's will is not thus subject to any superior “best,” and the creation of this world rather than some other world was a voluntary, one might say an arbitrary, choice on God's part. This voluntarism became stronger in Duns Scotus and the later Franciscans. In any case, the notion of “the best of all possible worlds” has no meaning, for there is an infinite gradation of possible worlds and no matter which is chosen, a better is conceivable.

Once again, to exalt the Creator, Bonaventura attacks both Aristotle and Aquinas. The former claimed to have proved that the world has always existed. The latter, as a Christian, had to deny the validity of Aristotle's argument; but, not being able to prove the doctrine of creation, he held that only faith, without reason, could choose between the two positions. Bonaventura, however, believed that creation could be demonstrated. He gives three similar arguments: (1) if the universe were eternal, infinity would be augmented every day, but infinity cannot be augmented; (2) one infinity, the

revolutions of the moon, would be 12 times another infinity, which is impossible; and (3) the present moment would complete an infinite series, but infinite series have no end.

For the same purpose, Bonaventura asserts that all created things are composites of matter and form: only God is pure. In this connection, of course, *matter* does not signify tangible body as in common speech today, but a principle of passivity, a possibility of change, of being otherwise, of falling to a species or genus, and therefore of being individual. This is the case with angels, who have no bodies, as well as with the human soul. Thomas, on the contrary, was teaching that angels are pure forms, not individuals, but each a species. To Bonaventura this seemed to narrow the ontological gap between the creature and the Creator. Furthermore, if the soul of man were the form of the body, it would be difficult, as Thomas found, to explain the continuance of the soul between death and the resurrection, but if the soul is itself an individual reality, this problem of Aquinas would disappear.

Beginning in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and continuing through the 13<sup>th</sup>, a knowledge of hitherto poorly known Aristotle came, with the help of Thomas, to dominate Christian thought, to the detriment of the Old Augustinian orthodoxy. Bonaventura, Platonic as he was, could not entirely escape its influence. He felt compelled to admit that the knowledge of nature, or sensible things, depended on sensation and abstraction. After all, man is midway between God and things; and if he looks away from God, sensation is necessary.

But it was not always so. Before sin, Adam knew everything without having learned. His knowledge was innate. Thus he was able to judge rightly of things, to see that things harmonized with this innate principles, and to read God's message easily from the book of nature. But the empiricism that now condemns us to the use of sensations, images, memory, and abstraction is a method accommodated to our fallen estate.

The nature of Adam's knowledge remains the ideal toward which we strive. So too, the nature of Adam's unfallen, righteous will. Beyond this life there is the beatitude of a total union of the soul with God: we shall see Him as He is and all things in Him. This knowledge will complete the joy and love of the will. The knowledge is essential, but will is superior to intellect because the final union with God is an act of will, namely, love.

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