

# Saint Bonaventure

**Saint Bonaventure**, Italian **San Bonaventura**, original name **Giovanni Di Fidanza**, (born *c.* 1217, Bagnoregio, Papal States—died July 15, 1274, Lyon; canonized April 14, 1482; feast day July 15), leading medieval theologian, minister general of the Franciscan order, and cardinal bishop of Albano. He wrote several works on the spiritual life and recodified the constitution of his order (1260). He was declared a doctor (teacher) of the church in 1587.



St. Bonaventure

St. Bonaventure, detail of a fresco by Benozzo Gozzoli; in the church of San Francesco, Montefalco, Italy.  
*Alinari/Art Resource, New York*

He was a son of Giovanni of Fidanza, a physician, and Maria of Ritella. He fell ill while a boy and, according to his own words, was saved from death by the intercession of St. Francis of Assisi. Entering the University of Paris in 1235, he received the master of arts degree in 1243 and then joined the Franciscan order, which named him Bonaventure in 1244.

He studied theology in the Franciscan school at Paris from 1243 to 1248. His masters, especially Alexander of Hales, recognized in him a student with a keen memory and unusual intelligence. He was also under the tutelage of John of La Rochelle. After their deaths (1245) he studied further under Eudes Rigauld and William of Meliton. He was later probably influenced by the Dominican Gueric of Saint-Quentin.

By turning the pursuit of truth into a form of divine worship, he integrated his study of theology with the Franciscan mode of the mendicant life. In 1248, he began to teach the Bible; from 1251 to 1253 he lectured on the *Sentences*, a medieval theology textbook by Peter Lombard, an Italian theologian of the 12th century, and he became a master of theology in 1254, when he assumed control of the Franciscan school in Paris. He taught there until 1257, producing many works, notably commentaries on the Bible and the *Sentences* and the *Breviloquium* (“Summary”), which presented a summary of his theology. These works showed his deep understanding of Scripture and the Fathers of the early church—principally St. Augustine—and a wide knowledge of the philosophers, particularly Aristotle.

Bonaventure was particularly noted in his day as a man with the rare ability to reconcile diverse traditions in theology and philosophy. He united different doctrines in a synthesis containing his personal conception of truth as a road to the love of God. In 1256 he defended the Franciscan ideal of the Christian life against William of Saint-Amour, a university teacher who accused the mendicants (friars who wandered about and begged for a living) of defaming the Gospel by their practice of poverty and who wanted to prevent the Franciscans and their fellow mendicants, the Dominicans, from attaining teaching positions. Bonaventure’s defense of the Franciscans and his personal probity as a member of his religious order led to his election as minister general of the Franciscans on Feb. 2, 1257.

Founded by St. Francis according to strict views about poverty, the Franciscan

order was at that time undergoing internal discord. One group, the Spirituals, disrupted the order by a rigorous view of poverty; another, the Relaxati, disturbed it by a laxity of life. Bonaventure used his authority so prudently that, placating the first group and reproofing the second, he preserved the unity of the order and reformed it in the spirit of St. Francis. The work of restoration and reconciliation owed its success to Bonaventure's tireless visits, despite delicate health, to each province of the order and to his own personal realization of the Franciscan ideal. In his travels, he preached the Gospel constantly and so elegantly that he was recognized everywhere as a most eloquent preacher. As a theologian, he based the revival of the order on his conception of the spiritual life, which he expounded in mystical treatises manifesting his Franciscan experience of contemplation as a perfection of the Christian life. His *Journey of the Mind to God* (1259) was a masterpiece showing the way by which man as a creature ought to love and contemplate God through Christ after the example of St. Francis. Revered by his order, Bonaventure recodified its constitutions (1260), wrote for it a new *Life of St. Francis of Assisi* (1263), and protected it (1269) from an assault by Gerard of Abbeville, a teacher of theology at Paris, who renewed the charge of William of Saint-Amour. He also protected the church during the period 1267–73 by upholding the Christian faith while denouncing the views of unorthodox masters at Paris who contradicted revelation in their philosophy.

Bonaventure's wisdom and ability to reconcile opposing views moved Pope Gregory X to name him cardinal bishop of Albano, Italy, in May 1273, though Bonaventure had declined to accept appointment to the see of York, England, from

Pope Clement IV in 1265. Gregory consecrated him in November at Lyon, where he resigned as minister general of the Franciscans in May 1274. At the second Council of Lyon he was the leading figure in the reform of the church, reconciling the secular (parish) clergy with the mendicant orders. He also had a part in restoring the Greek church to union with Rome. His death, at the council, was viewed as the loss of a wise and holy man, full of compassion and virtue, captivating with love all who knew him. He was buried the same day in a Franciscan church with the pope in attendance. The respect and love that was held for Bonaventure is exemplified in the formal announcement of the council: "At the funeral there was much sorrow and tears; for the Lord has given him this grace, that all who saw him were filled with an immense love for him." His exemplary life as a Franciscan and the continual influence of his doctrine on the life and devotion of the Western church won for him a declaration of sanctity by Pope Sixtus IV; he was designated a doctor of the church by Sixtus V.

Modern scholars consider him to have been one of the foremost men of his age, an intrepid defender of human and divine truth, and an outstanding exponent of a mystical and Christian wisdom.

The critical edition of St. Bonaventure's works is *Opera omnia*, 10 vol. (1882–1902). Translations of his works by Jose de Vinck are "The Journey of the Mind to God," in vol. 1 of *The Works of Bonaventure* (1960); and vol. 2, *Breviloquium* (1963).

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