

About St. Bonaventure by Dr. Elizabeth Dreyer

BONAVENTURE, ST. (ca. 1221–1274)

Bonaventure was born in Bagnoregio, a small town located about sixty miles north of Rome, Italy. At the time of his birth the Franciscan Order was growing both in numbers and in influence and Bonaventure himself attests to having been cured of a serious illness as a child through the intercession of Francis of Assisi. His commitment to sing the praises of Francis remained an important thread throughout his life. At the age of seventeen, Bonaventure began studies at the University of Paris, where he again encountered the Franciscans, especially the great Alexander of Hales who was his teacher. Bonaventure entered the Franciscans in 1243 and until 1257, when he was elected minister general of the order at the age of forty, studied and taught at the University of Paris. Bonaventure was made a cardinal in 1273, remained head of the order until the chapter of May, 1274, and died in July of that year. He was canonized in 1482 and declared a Doctor of the Church in 1588.

Bonaventure's life encompassed two often opposing roles—that of Scholastic theologian/university professor and that of pastoral leader of a new and growing mendicant order. In fact, this very tension was reflected within the Franciscan Order and was threatening to break it apart. Some members were wary of new developments in the order which seemed to jeopardize the radical ideals of poverty and simplicity espoused by Francis. Others felt that the order needed to adapt and develop with the times, which meant owning books, buildings and property, and holding illustrious positions at the University of Paris. Bonaventure pursued a moderate position, struggling to remain faithful to the ideals of Francis while allowing the order to change and adapt to new circumstances. His *Life of Francis* embodies this tension and Bonaventure's attempts to hold the struggling order together. Because of his intelligence and personal holiness, Bonaventure is called the "Second Founder of the Order."

Bonaventure was a prolific writer. At the beginning of his career, he produced speculative, theological texts and biblical commentaries. After his election as minister general, his thoughts and his writing turn to

more pastoral, spiritual concerns. His most well-known mystical work is *The Soul's Journey Into God*, a text that continues to inspire Christians who set out on their own spiritual journeys.

Bonaventure's theology reflects a number of distinctive elements. In true Franciscan fashion, Bonaventure is profoundly aware of the presence of God in creation. In an ascending pattern from inanimate matter to human persons, he sees all of creation as a mirror of God. Second, his theology has been characterized by the phrase "coincidence of opposites." In his life and work, Bonaventure maintained a creative tension between the God who is beyond us and the God who is within us; between intellectual rigor and poetic, mystical expression. Third, his theology is eminently Christocentric. Bonaventure sees united in Christ "the first and the last, the highest and the lowest, the circumference and the center ..., the Creator and the creature" (*The Soul's Journey Into God*). Finally, Bonaventure's theology builds on the affective theology of Augustine. Bonaventure places love and will (not intellect) at the center of his theology and spirituality. As one moves toward the heights of mystical encounter with God, Bonaventure notes that "affect alone keeps the vigil, and imposes silence on all the other powers" (*The Six Days of Creation*).

ELIZABETH DREYER

Michael Glazier and Monika K. Hellwig, [*The Modern Catholic Encyclopedia*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 99–100.