

About St. Bonaventure by Dr. Stephen E. Lahey, Ph.D.

PIOUS PEACEMAKER

Bonaventure

c. 1217–1274

Giovanni Fidanza, later known as Bonaventure, joined the Franciscans when he was 17. After Francis of Assisi, Bonaventure was the person most responsible for the organization and growth of the Franciscan order. He was also one of its greatest theologians.

Bonaventure began a friendship with Thomas Aquinas at the University of Paris, where they received their doctorates together in 1267. He wrote voluminously, establishing himself as the Franciscans' answer to the Dominican Aquinas.

In each of Bonaventure's theological works, he reveals his devotion for the beauty of creation and the realization of God's love in each creature. Perhaps the best example of his unique approach is "The Mind's Road to God," which leads the reader in a series of six meditations from contemplation of God's reflection in nature, in the natural faculties of the human soul, and ultimately through grace to the perfect Being of the divine.

The purely intellectual theorizing that was creeping into scholastic discourse repelled Bonaventure. He was determined to keep love, compassion, and an awareness of nature's abundance as integral parts of daily spiritual development.

"The beauty of things," he wrote, "in the variety of light, shape and color, in simple, mixed and even organic bodies—such as heavenly bodies—and minerals like stones and metals, and plants and animals clearly proclaims the divine power that produces all things from nothing, the divine wisdom that clearly distinguishes all things, and the divine goodness that lavishly adorns all things."

Bonaventure had gained a reputation for an even-handed, judicious

temperament while studying in Paris, and the Franciscans desperately needed that influence. The order had been split by violent disagreement about Francis's ideal of apostolic purity. One group, the Spirituals, denounced all property ownership as a compromise with the curse of Original Sin. The other group, the Conventuals, saw the Franciscan mission as including an embrace of the world and its trappings.

Bonaventure's willingness to listen carefully and lovingly to all sides of a dispute allowed him to rescue the order from chaos by instituting a code of laws that struck a balance between the two factions. His biography of Francis, approved by the order in 1263, helped define that compromise. He even explained the rule of poverty in a way that made sense to a world entranced with material success.

As his reputation within the church grew, he earned the position of Cardinal-Bishop of Albano in 1273. Bonaventure was not eager to become a prince of the church, though. When papal envoys came bearing the cardinal's wide-brimmed hat, the story goes, they found Bonaventure washing dishes outside a Florence convent. Rather than interrupt himself from his task, he told the envoys to hang the hat on a nearby tree until he had time to free his hands. He died while trying to mend the Roman church's schism with the Greek church a year later. He might have been poisoned.

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A Mingling of Minds

David B Burrell, ["A Mingling of Minds,"](#) *Christian History Magazine-Issue 73: Thomas Aquinas: Greatest Medieval Theologian* (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 2002).