



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of November 8, 2015,  
Feast of Blessed Elisabeth of the Trinity

**Dear Friends,**

**A**SKED about the source from which he drew such profound understanding, Saint Bonaventure pointed to his crucifix: "This is the book that teaches me." One day as he was debating theology with him, Thomas Aquinas saw Jesus on the cross above his friend's head. Rays came forth from the Savior's sacred wounds and came to rest on Bonaventure's writings. Out of respect for the Divine Master, Thomas didn't dare argue further.

Bonaventure, who would later be named the "Seraphic Doctor" (because of how he united theology with contemplative love of God), was born in 1217 or 1221 in Bagnoregio, a small town in central Italy, near Lake Bolsena. The son of Giovanni di Fidanza, a doctor, and Maria Ritella, he was given his father's first name at Baptism. As a child, Giovanni fell gravely ill. His father tried all the remedies in vain. His mother remained by his bedside and besought God to save their child. To obtain his recovery, she made a vow to Francis of Assisi, who had recently died in 1226, but was already invoked by all of Italy. Giovanni recovered. "O buona ventura!" (Oh happy event!) cried the mother. This expression became her child's nickname. The child knew in his heart that after God it was Francis to whom he owed his bodily life, and it was also Francis whom he would later ask to nourish the life of his soul, by entering the Franciscan Order.

***"What should I do with my life?"***

**P**aris, then the light of the West, attracted minds eager to learn. The city was known far and wide for its theological teaching. In 1235, Giovanni di Fidanza sent his son there, where he first devoted himself to studying the liberal arts (grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music). An extremely pious and serious student, he earned his Master of Arts diploma, and then asked himself the crucial question, "What should I do with my life?" Drawn by the fervor and evangelical ideal of the Friars Minor, Giovanni knocked at the door of the Franciscan monastery in Paris, founded in 1219. In Saint Francis and the movement he had raised up, the student recognized the influence of JESUS CHRIST. Later, he would explain the reasons for his choice: "I confess before God," he would write, "that the reason that I love the life of blessed Francis the most is that it echoes the birth and early development of the Church. The Church began with simple fishermen, and was subsequently enriched by very distinguished and wise teachers; the



Saint Bonaventure

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religious family of Blessed Francis was not established by the prudence of men but by Christ."

During his pilgrimage to Assisi on October 4, 2013, Pope Francis wondered, "Where did Francis's journey to Christ begin? It began with the gaze of the crucified JESUS. With letting JESUS look at us at the very moment that He gives His life for us and draws us to Himself. Francis experienced this in a special way in the Church of San Damiano ... On that cross, JESUS is depicted not as dead, but alive! Blood is flowing from His wounded hands, feet and side, but that blood speaks of life. JESUS' eyes are not closed but open, wide open: He looks at us in a way that touches our hearts. The cross does not speak to us about defeat and failure; paradoxically, it speaks to us about a death which is life, a death which gives life, for it speaks to us of love, the love of God incarnate, a love which does not die, but triumphs over evil and death. When we let the crucified JESUS gaze upon us, we are re-created, we become 'a new creation'. Everything else starts with this: the experience of transforming grace, the experience of being loved for no merits of our own, in spite of our being sinners" (cf. Gal. 6:14).

In 1243, Giovanni took the Franciscan habit and received the name Bonaventure. From the beginning of his religious life, he showed profound humility, always seeking the last place and the most menial tasks. He was stirred by a great love for the Holy Eucharist. However, he sometimes did not dare approach the divine Sacrament, so filled was he with shame for his imperfections. One

day when this disposition held him back, an angel came and brought him Communion, to encourage him not to stay away from this Sacrament under the pretext of such misplaced humility. The young friar was always looking for ways to be charitable, in particular towards his confreres whom he never refused a favor, even when it troubled and cost him. He was advised to study at the theology faculty in Paris. There he met the eminent professor who would influence his entire life. Since 1231, this faculty had been led by Alexander of Hales, who had left the world when he was enjoying its glory. He became a Franciscan, and would remain, until his death in 1245, the intellectual guide of his students, who were enthused by his teaching. Brother Alexander of Hales quickly noted the moral worth of his new student. "In Brother Bonaventure," he declared, "Adam seems not to have sinned." As for the pupil, he heaped praise on his teacher: "This impossible to refute doctor will remain my father and my guide. Never will I stray from his opinions." On this foundation of confidence, Bonaventure prepared for a baccalaureate in theology. In spite of his health, which would remain delicate throughout his life, he shone with his penetrating mind, his hard work, and even more his exemplary practice of the religious virtues. Already well-versed in poetry and music, bit by bit he showed himself to be a profound philosopher and solid theologian, gifts that he made good use of in his ardent preparation for ordination to the priesthood. Obtaining his degree in 1248, he received from Blessed John of Parma, the Minister General of the Franciscans, faculties to teach in Paris. While he pursued his study in the sacred sciences, the new professor taught lectures that from the start attracted many listeners.

### The primacy of love

Benedict XVI notes the manner in which Bonaventure approached theology: "There is an arrogant manner of engaging in theology, a pride of reason that sets itself above the word of God. Yet real theology, the rational work of the true and good theology has another origin, not the pride of reason. One who loves wants always to know his beloved better and better; it is not prompted by pride that true theology involves reason and research, ... [but it is] motivated by love of the One to whom it gives its consent ... and wants to be better acquainted with the beloved: this is the fundamental intention of theology. Thus in the end, for Saint Bonaventure, the primacy of love is crucial" (General Audience of March 17, 2010).

From 1248 to 1257, Brother Bonaventure also wrote theological works and delivered homilies. Whether addressing simple believers, religious communities, the king, or even clerics, he always preached the Word of God with the same simplicity, clarity, and unction. He was called the leading preacher of his day. Nevertheless, at that very time, the members of the University of Paris began a violent polemic against the mendicant orders (Franciscans and Dominicans). As a result, Brother Bonaventure and Brother Thomas Aquinas were delayed

in being given the certification required to teach at the university, even though both of them received their doctorates in 1253. Doubt was even cast on the authenticity of their consecrated life. Certainly, the new form of religious life introduced by the mendicant orders (who lived from alms and not from a fixed income) gave rise to misunderstandings, but the conflict was fanned by envy and jealousy. In response to those who contested the legitimacy of the mendicant orders, Bonaventure wrote a work titled *Evangelical Perfection*. In it, he showed that in their radical practice of the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, the Friars Minor were following the advice given by Jesus Himself in the Gospels. The conflict subsided, at least for a while, thanks to the personal intervention of Pope Alexander IV. Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas were officially recognized, in 1257, as doctors and teachers at the University of Paris.

### Minister General

That same year, John of Parma, the Minister General of the Franciscans for the last ten years, was accused by some brothers of reprising the heresies of Joachim of Fiore († 1202), according to whom the Church must renounce all organization and hierarchical structure, in order to be led directly by the Spirit. A born conciliator, John of Parma convened an extraordinary General Chapter, at which he gave his resignation and suggested electing Brother Bonaventure in his place. The Chapter accepted this recommendation. Brother Bonaventure learned the news in Paris. The Order of Friars Minor, the leadership of which he took up reluctantly, had developed phenomenally in less than fifty years. It numbered thirty-five thousand members, spread throughout thirty-two provinces, from Sweden to Egypt, from Portugal to Hungary, with missionary outposts in the Middle East and as far away as Peking. For seventeen years, Bonaventure carried out this duty with wisdom and devotion, visiting the provinces, writing to the Brothers, and intervening, at times with severity, to eliminate abuses. In October 1259, wanting to immerse himself in the spirit of Saint Francis, he withdrew to Mount Alvernia, where in 1224 Saint Francis had received the stigmata. From this retreat was born the most famous of Saint Bonaventure's writings, *The Journey of the Mind into God*, a manual of mystical contemplation.

"Saint Bonaventure," Benedict XVI emphasized, "also shares with Saint Francis of Assisi his love for creation, his joy at the beauty of God's creation. On this point I cite a sentence from the first chapter of the *Journey*: 'He who is not brightened by such splendors of created things is blind; he who does not awake at such clamors is deaf; he who does not praise God on account of all these effects is mute; he who does not turn towards the First Principle on account of such indications is stupid' (I, 15). The whole creation speaks loudly of God, of the good and beautiful God, of His love. Hence for Saint Bonaventure the whole of our life is a 'journey', a pilgrimage, an ascent to God. But with our own strength

alone we are incapable of climbing to the loftiness of God. God Himself must help us, must 'pull' us up. Thus prayer is necessary. Prayer, says the saint, is the mother and the origin of the upward movement—*sursum actio*, an action that lifts us up, Bonaventure says" (General Audience of March 17, 2010).

### Clear up a misunderstanding

Brother Bonaventure wanted to consolidate the Order's growth, and above all to endow it with unity of thought and deed, in complete fidelity with the charism of Saint Francis. For among the followers of the *Poverello* of Assisi, there was a very serious misunderstanding of the founder's message, of his humble faithfulness to the Gospel and the Church. And this misunderstanding resulted in a wrong vision of Christianity itself. One group of the Brothers, called the "spirituals", maintained that with Saint Francis an entirely new phase of history had begun, and that the "eternal Gospel" mentioned in the Apocalypse (14:6) would be revealed and would replace the New Testament. They maintained that the Church had already fulfilled its role in history, and would be replaced by a purely charismatic community of free men, guided interiorly by the Spirit, the "spirituals". Brother Bonaventure immediately perceived that with this spiritualistic concept, inspired by the writings of Joachim of Fiore, the Order could not be governed, but would descend into anarchy. To avert this danger, the General Chapter, held in Narbonne in 1260, ratified a document that gathered together and unified the norms that regulate the daily life of the Friars Minor.

Bonaventure nevertheless had the intuition that legal provisions, even those inspired by wisdom and moderation, would not be sufficient to ensure harmony of hearts and minds. For this reason, he undertook to put in writing the authentic charism of Saint Francis and an overview of his life and teaching, in order to make them better known. To compose the biography of the holy founder, he gathered all the available documents and called on the memories of those who had directly known him. Brother Thomas Aquinas, who came to visit him one day as he was working on this book, saw him completely absorbed in contemplation. "Let us leave him alone," he said, "and let a saint write the life of a saint." This biography, titled *Legenda Maior*, presents the most faithful portrait of the founder and received the approval of the General Chapter of Pisa (1263). The Latin word "Legenda," unlike the English word that derives from it, does not indicate the fruit of imagination; on the contrary, it means an authoritative text "to be read" in public.

"What image of Saint Francis emerged from the heart and pen of his follower and successor, Saint Bonaventure?" asked Benedict XVI. "The key point: Francis is an 'alter Christus' (another Christ), a man who sought Christ passionately. In the love that impelled Francis to imitate Christ, he was entirely conformed

to Christ. Bonaventure pointed out this living ideal to all Francis' followers." And Benedict XVI noted that the specific emphasis of Saint Bonaventure's theology "is explained on the basis of the Franciscan charism. The *Poverello* of Assisi, notwithstanding the intellectual debates of his time, had shown with his whole life the primacy of love. He was a living icon in love with Christ and thus he made the figure of the Lord present in his time. He did not convince his contemporaries with his words but rather with his life. In all Saint Bonaventure's works ... one sees and finds this Franciscan inspiration; in other words one notices that his thought starts with his encounter with the *Poverello* of Assisi" (General Audiences of March 3 and 17, 2010).

### The great treasure

Despite the great number of his religious, Bonaventure made sure that all of them could approach him. His charity for his Brothers was limitless. A lay Brother, Egide, who had an admirable simplicity, expressed his worry: "When I think about the insights that doctors like you receive from heaven, I wonder, how can an ignoramus like myself be saved?" Bonaventure replied, "If God granted a man no other talent than the grace to love Him, that would be enough and would be a great treasure."—"Are you saying that an illiterate man can love the Lord more than a great genius?"—"Of course, Brother Egide, not only as much but much more. One sees very simple old women who, on this fundamental point, surpass the greatest theologians." With these words, the Brother, transported by joy, ran out onto the road and began to shout, "Come, simple and unlettered men, come good women, all of you come to love Our Lord. You can love Him as much as and even more than Father Bonaventure and the most clever theologians!"

On November 24, 1265, Clement IV appointed Brother Bonaventure as the Archbishop of York, England. The country was not unknown to Bonaventure—he had already been there as an apostolic visitor. However, in York the Church was torn by dissent. The Pope was undoubtedly happy to be able to send a man there who was wise, of irreproachable morals, firm yet kind, whom one could hope would reconcile all the opposing parties. Bonaventure, at the time in Paris, left immediately for Italy, in spite of the winter weather, to ask the Pope not to tear him away from the duties of the Order at just that moment. His arguments had an effect, but it was just a postponement. His activity, his prudence in governing the Order, his zeal as a reformer, and his great projects kept him in the spotlight. Gathered in Viterbi to elect a successor to Clement IV, the cardinals were unable, in spite of three years of debate, to reach agreement, in large part as a result of political intrigues. Bonaventure's advice was requested when he passed through the city in 1271. He gave the cardinals a sermon on their duties to the Church and sketched a rough portrait of the ideal Pope. Thanks to these insights, Teobaldo Visconti, then a legate in Syria, was elected; he took the name

Gregory X. The new Pope pressed the Minister General of the Franciscans to give him four Brothers to be his ambassadors in the Orient and negotiate union with the Greeks.

After presiding over a Chapter of his Order in Lyon in 1272, Bonaventure moved back to Paris, where at the university he gave a series of lectures titled *Hexaemeron*, which provided an allegorical explanation of the six days of Creation. But on June 3, 1273, Gregory X interrupted this preaching by naming Bonaventure Cardinal Bishop of Albano. This time, acceptance was forced upon the chosen one; he immediately set off to meet with the Pope. From his end, the Holy Father sent legates to meet Bonaventure and bring him the cardinal's hat. They caught up with him at the monastery in Mugello, near Florence. Brother Bonaventure, who was washing dishes, asked them to wait until he had finished. Soon, the Pope asked the new cardinal to help him prepare the second ecumenical council of Lyon, the aim of which was to reestablish communion between the Latin and Greek Churches, separated since 1054. Not allowing himself to be discouraged by the failures of his predecessors, Gregory X wished to reestablish union.

### **The second council of Lyon**

**B**onaventure resigned as Minister General on May 20, 1274, and proposed Brother Jerome of Ascoli to succeed him. Having become an official negotiator with the Greeks on behalf of the Holy See, he led the debates of the council. On July 6<sup>th</sup>, during the fourth session, the representatives of the Greek Emperor Michael Palaiologos agreed to sign a profession of faith that recognized the primacy of the Pope, the insertion of the *Filioque* in the Creed (the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*), the existence of Purgatory,

and Christ's institution of the seven sacraments. They recognized that the "Holy Roman Church has over the whole Catholic Church supreme and sovereign authority which, she humbly and truthfully recognizes, she received with all fullness of power from the Lord Himself, in the person of Peter, the chief and head of the Apostles, of whom the Roman pontiff is the successor. And since the Church must, above all else, defend the truth of the Faith, questions which arise in regard to the Faith must be decided by her judgment ... to her all Churches are subject, and their prelates owe her obedience and reverence." Unfortunately, this union with the Greeks, achieved at such great effort, would not last.

The next day, Bonaventure fell gravely ill. He died the night of July 13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup>. His body was entombed in the church of his Order in Lyon, in the presence of the Pope and Council Fathers. An anonymous pontifical notary composed this eulogy to the deceased: "A good man, affable, pious and merciful, full of virtues, loved by God and men ... God indeed had given him such grace, that all who saw him were penetrated by a love that the heart could not conceal."

In 1434, when his body was being transferred, his head was found in a perfect state of preservation, which greatly promoted the cause for his canonization. One of his arms was subsequently detached and brought to Bagnoregio, the town of his birth. That is the only relic of his body that remains, as his tomb in Lyon was desecrated by Huguenots during the sack of the city in the sixteenth century. On April 14, 1482, Sixtus IV, a Franciscan Pope, inscribed Bonaventure in the canon of saints. Sixtus V, another Franciscan, elevated him to the rank of Doctor of the Church in 1587.

Saint Bonaventure's teaching was permeated with an immense love of Christ. "Faith is in the intellect," declared Saint Bonaventure, "in such a way that it provokes affection. For example: the knowledge that Christ died for us does not remain knowledge but necessarily becomes affection, love" (*Proœmium in I Sent.*, q. 3). Let us ask him to obtain for us an intellect obedient to the faith and a heart inflamed with love.

Dom Antoine Marie o.f.m.

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