

JULY XIV. ST. BONAVENTURE
CARDINAL-BISHOP OF ALBANO, DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH
A.D. 1274

Of the youth of this greatest successor of St. Francis of Assisi nothing is known beyond the facts that he was born at Bagnorea, near Viterbo, in the year 1221, the son of John Fianza and Mary Ritella. He was clothed in the order of Friars Minor and studied at the University of Paris under an Englishman, Alexander of Hales, “the Unanswerable Doctor;” Bonaventure, who was to become known as the Seraphic Doctor, himself taught theology and Holy Scripture there from 1248 to 1257. His penetrating genius was balanced by the most careful judgement by which, while he dived to the bottom of every subtle inquiry, he cut off whatever was superfluous, dwelling only on that knowledge which is useful and solid, or at least necessary to unravel the false principles and sophistry of erroneous opinions. Thus he became a proficient in scholastic philosophy and theology. Whilst he referred all his studies to the divine honour and his own sanctification, he was careful not to lose the end in the means or to let his application degenerate into dissipation of mind and idle curiosity. Not content to make his studies a continuation of prayer, he devoted to formal prayer a great part of his time, knowing this to be the key of all spiritual life. For only the Spirit of God, as St. Paul teaches, can lead us into the secrets and designs of God, and engrave His teachings on our hearts. Such was the innocence and purity in which Brother Bonaventure lived, that Alexander of Hales used to say of him that he “seemed not to have sinned in Adam.” A remarkable cheerfulness always appeared in his countenance, which resulted from the inward peace of his soul, for as he himself says, “A spiritual joy is the greatest sign of the divine grace dwelling in a soul.”

He had no eyes to see anything in himself but faults and imperfections, and this humility sometimes withheld him from holy communion, notwithstanding the desire of his soul to be united to the object of his love and to approach the fountain of grace. But God by a miracle overcame his fears. “Several days had passed,” say the acts of his canonization, “nor durst he yet presume to present himself at the heavenly banquet. But whilst he was assisting at Mass, and meditating on the passion of Jesus Christ, our Saviour, to crown his humility and love, put into his mouth by the ministry of an angel part of the consecrated Host, taken from the hand of the priest.” From this time his communions were without scruple and sources of great joy and grace. Bonaventure prepared himself to receive the priesthood by long fasts and fervent prayer, that he might obtain an abundant measure of grace for that sacred dignity which he looked forward to with fear and trembling, so high and incomprehensible did it appear to him. A prayer which he composed for his own use after Mass, beginning with the words, *Transfige dulcissime Domine Iesu*, “Pierce, dearest Lord Jesus, the inmost depths...” is recommended by the Church to us all at that most solemn time.

Bonaventure was called by the obligations of his priestly character to labour for the salvation of his neighbour, and to this he devoted himself with enthusiasm. He announced the word of God to the people with an energy which kindled a flame in the hearts of those that heard him; everything was burning with love that came from his mouth. While at the University of Paris he produced one of the best-known of his written works, the *Commentary on the Sentences* of Peter Lombard, which covers the whole field of scholastic theology. Of it Pope Sixtus IV said that “he uttered such things on sacred science that the Holy Ghost would seem to have spoken by his mouth.” The years of his public lecturing at Paris were greatly disturbed by the attack made on the mendicant friars by the other professors at the university. Jealousy of their pastoral and academic success and the standing reproof to worldliness and ease of the friars’ lives were in part behind this attempt to get them excluded from the schools. The

leader of the secular party was William of Saint-Amour, who made a bitter onslaught on the mendicants in a book called *The Perils of the Last Times*, and other writings. Bonaventure, who had to suspend lecturing for a time, replied in a treatise on evangelical poverty, named *Concerning the Poverty of Christ*. The pope, Alexander IV, appointed a commission of cardinals to go into the matter at Anagni, and on their findings ordered Saint-Amour's book to be burnt, vindicated and reinstated the friars, and ordered the offenders to withdraw their attack. A year later, in 1257, St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas Aquinas received the degree of doctor of theology together.

For Blessed Isabella, St. Louis IX's sister, and her nunnery of Poor Clares at Longchamps, St. Bonaventure wrote *Concerning Perfection of Life*. Other mystical works of his are the *Soliloquy* and *Concerning the Threefold Way*. The love which every word breathes in the writings of this doctor pierces the heart, and Gerson, the learned and devout chancellor of the University of Paris, writes of his works, "Among all the Catholic doctors Eustachius (for so we may translate his name of Bonaventure) seems to me the best for enlightening the understanding and at the same time warming the heart. In particular his *Breviloquium* and *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* are written with so much force, art and conciseness that nothing can be beyond them." In another book he says: "Bonaventure's works seem to me most suitable for the instruction of the faithful. They are solid, safe and devout; and he keeps as far as he can from niceties, not meddling with logical or physical questions which are foreign to the matter in hand. Nor is there any doctrine more sublime, more divine, or more conducive to religion." Trithemius, a learned Benedictine, writes, "Whoever would be both learned and devout, let him read the works of Bonaventure." This is particularly to be understood of his spiritual treatises. The joys of Heaven were the frequent meditation of his soul, and he endeavoured by his writings to excite in others the same fervent desire for our heavenly country. He writes that "God Himself, all the glorious spirits, and the whole family of the eternal King wait for us and desire that we should be with them; and shall not we long above all things to be admitted into their happy company? He who had not in this valley of tears continually raised his soul above visible things to become already, in ardent desire, an inhabitant of those blessed regions, would be considerably abashed upon appearing amongst them." Bonaventure puts the perfection of Christian virtue, not so much in the more heroic life of a religious state, as in performing our ordinary actions well. "The perfection of a religious man," he says, "is to do common things in a perfect manner. A constant fidelity in small things is a great and heroic virtue." It is a continual crucifixion of self-love, a complete sacrifice of all our actions, moments and affections, and the reign of God's grace throughout our whole lives; St. Bonaventure's deep appreciation of this is illustrated by an anecdote related of him and Bd. Giles of Assisi (April 23).

In 1257 Bonaventure was chosen minister general of the Friars Minor. He was not yet thirty-six years old, and the order was torn by dissensions, some of the friars being for an inflexible severity, others demanding certain mitigations of the rule; between the two extremes were a number of other interpretations. Some of the extreme rigorists, the so-called Spirituals, had even fallen into error and disobedience, and thus given a handle to the friars' opponents in the Paris dispute. The new minister general wrote a letter to his provincials in which he made it clear that he required a disciplined observance of the rule, involving a reformation of the relaxed, but giving no countenance to the excesses of the Spirituals. At Narbonne in 1260, the first of the five general chapters which he held, he produced a set of constitutions on the rule, which were adopted and had a permanent effect on Franciscan life, but they failed to pacify the excessive rigorists. At the request of the friars assembled in this chapter, he undertook to write the life of St. Francis, which he compiled with a spirit which shows him to have been filled with the virtues of the founder whose life he wrote. St. Thomas Aquinas, coming one day whilst

he was employed in this work, saw him through the door of his cell in contemplation, and going away, said, "Let us leave a saint to work for a saint." The resulting biography, the "Greater Legend," is a work of great value for the life of St. Francis; but St. Bonaventure can hardly be acquitted of a tendency sometimes to strain his material so as to tell against those who favoured a moderation of the strict Franciscan life. He governed his order for seventeen years and has been justly called its second founder.

In 1265 Pope Clement IV nominated St. Bonaventure to be archbishop of York in succession to Geoffrey of Ludham; he induced the pope to accept his refusal, but in 1273 Bd. Gregory X created him cardinal-bishop of Albano, adding a command to accept that charge without alleging any pretext against it, and immediately to come to Rome. He sent legates to meet him on the road with the hat and other insignia of the office, and it is said that they found the saint in a convent of his order in the Mugello near Florence, washing the dishes. He desired them to hang the cardinal's hat on the bough of a tree, because he could not decently take it in his greasy hands, and left them to walk in the garden till he had finished his work. Then taking up the hat he went to the legates, and paid them the respect due.

Gregory X ordered him to prepare the matters to be dealt with in the general council which he had called to meet at Lyons for the reunion of the Greeks, the Emperor Michael Palaeologus having made proposals to Pope Clement IV for union. All the best theologians were sent for: St. Thomas Aquinas died on the way thither. But St. Bonaventure was the outstanding figure in this great assembly. He arrived with the pope some months before it began, and between the second and third sessions he held his last general chapter of his order, in which he abdicated the office of minister general. When the Greek delegates arrived he conferred with them, and the reunion with Rome was duly effected. In thanksgiving the pope sang Mass on the feast of SS. Peter and Paul, and the epistle, gospel and creed were sung first in Latin then in Greek; St. Bonaventure preached. But amidst all this triumph, on the night of July 14-15, the Seraphic Doctor died; his mortal eyes were spared the pain of seeing Constantinople speedily repudiate the union it had sought and he had laboured to make good. Peter of Tarentaise, a Dominican friar, afterwards Pope Innocent V, preached his panegyric, in which he said: "No one ever beheld Bonaventure who did not conceive a great regard and affection for him; and even strangers were desirous to follow his counsel and advice, simply from hearing him speak: for he was gentle, courteous, humble, pleasing to all, compassionate, prudent, chaste and adorned with all virtues."

There is a story told that when St. Bonaventure, as minister general, visited the friary of Foligno there was a certain friar who wished to talk with him, but his humility and shyness would not allow him to force himself on his superior's notice. When, however, Bonaventure had gone, and the friar realized that he had missed his chance, he plucked up courage, pursued the general down the road, and catching him up, begged for a few words alone. The saint at once withdrew with him to the roadside, and their conversation was a long one. When at length the friar had returned home, comforted and rejoicing, Bonaventure noticed signs of impatience among those waiting for him. He smiled and gently rebuked them. "My brethren," he said, "I could not do otherwise. I am at the same time both prelate and servant, and that poor brother is both my brother and my master. These are the words of the rule: 'The ministers shall receive the brethren with charity and kindness, and so hold themselves towards them that the brethren shall be able to treat with them as masters with their servants, for the ministers must be the servants of all the friars.' And so I, as minister and servant, must be at the disposal of this poor brother who is my master, and help him according to my ability and his needs." In this spirit did he discharge the office which he had taken up with the words, "I well know my own incapacity, but I also know that it is hard to kick against the goad. And so, in spite of my want of understanding, my inexperience in affairs, and my great unwillingness, I will not persist in opposition to the wish of a numerous family

and the order of the supreme pontiff, for fear lest at the same time I should resist the will of God. Therefore I take upon my weak shoulders a heavy, nay, an almost intolerable, burden. I hope for help from Heaven and count on all the help your good-will can give me.” In those two passages is Bonaventure the saint, simply humble and simply charitable. Had he never been a member of the Seraphic order he would still deserve the title of Seraphic Doctor because of the angelic virtues with which he adorned his learning. He was declared a doctor of the Church in 1588, having been canonized in 1482.

There is no formal contemporary or quasi-contemporary life of St. Bonaventure, but there are abundant references to him in the chronicles of the Franciscan Order and in other early sources. The most important notices of this kind, extracted e.g. from Salimbene, Bernard of Besse, Angelo Clareno, “the Chronicle of the XXIV Generals.” etc., have been carefully re-edited in vol. x of the monumental Quaracchi edition of the works of the Seraphic Doctor. The text of the canonization process instituted at Lyons in 1479-1480 (the canonization itself only took place in 1483 under Sixtus IV) has been printed in *Miscellanea Francescana di storia, di lettere, di arti*, vols. xvii and xviii (1916 and 1917), but it deals mainly with miracles. Of the numerous modern biographies, the most reliable seems to be that of L. Lemmens as published in an Italian version at Milan in 1921. In this edition the original German text (1909) has been extensively revised in deference to criticisms, notably those made in the *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* (vol. iii, pp. 344-348). The life written in Italian by D. M. Sparacio (1921) emphasizes the point of view of the Conventual Franciscans and is not free from a certain animus. Similarly that of Leonard de Carvalho e Castro (1923, in French), though admirably presented, rather minimizes the active part taken by St. Bonaventure at Paris in opposition to Dominican teaching. On the other hand this theological combativeness of the great Franciscan is somewhat exaggerated by the Capuchin Father Jules d’Albi in his book, *S. Bonaventure et les luttes doctrinales de 1267-1277* (1923). An important study of the chronology of St. Bonaventure, 1257 to 1274, by P. Glorieux, in the *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* (vol. xix, pp. 145-168), seems to leave little room for the contention of A. G. Little in the same volume (pp. 289-291) that the Seraphic Doctor visited Oxford towards the close of the year 1259. Finally mention should be made of two other biographies in French, that of E. Clop (1922) and E. Gilson (1927), as also of the excellent appreciation of St. Bonaventure in P. Gratien, *Histoire de la fondation et de l’évolution de l’Ordre des Frères Mineurs...* (1928), pp. 249-333. A good bibliography is provided in the work last named, as also in DTC. See also É. Longpré in DHG., t. ix, cc. 741-788, and in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, t. i, cc. 1768-1843. Bonaventure’s *Breviloquium*, a concise summary of his teaching, was translated into English in 1946.

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